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Terms and Phrases and Updates

[image]

Next update: Chapter 11 ETA: ~??? March maybe

A/N: Sorry I've been busy working rent is killer, and also working on my other main project. I do hope to have some time this Saturday to finish chapter 11.

Parts of a Dragon

Caedyt - (Kay die te) a sensory appendage on a dragon. Mostly common on Night fury. (Aka what look like toothless's ears.)

Horns - hard appendages on the head.

Crown - part of a dragon's head, made of spikes, horns, or a bony substances that flairs up on the top of the head like a crown

Crest - Similar to a crown but is in the center of the face starting at the bridge of the nose or maybe the top of the head can be in many shapes.

Wings - Flexible webbed appendages that allow a dragon to fly

Rudder wing/fin - a wing that is near the base of the tail used to help lift, glide, and float.

Tail fin - a small piece of webbed wing on the end of the tail.

Terms of the Dragons

Sharing Flames - to literally and figuratively share a flame. Often used to discuss happenings, but on rare occasions giving a flame to another for a bed or for when a clan member has passed away.

Into the Wild - Allegiances

[image]

Thunderclan

Titan-wing

Bluestar - Blue-grey female Wooly howl with tinged silver around her muzzle

Demi-wing

Redtail - Ginger, Soot, and ashen male Deadly nadder with a ginger tail and spikes.

[image]

Apprentice Dustpaw

Nurture-wing

Spottedleaf - Golden, soot, and ruby female Deadly Nadder

[image]

(I know its a bad image but I lost the file, will be redoing it but until then here's a rough idea of what Spottedleaf looked like)

Broad-wings

Lionheart - Golden male Rumblehorn with Darker golden neck plating that puffs out a bit resembling a lion.

Apprentice Greypaw

Tigerclaw - Dark brown striped Triple strike with abnormally large Claws.

Apprentice Ravenpaw

Whitestorm - Big white male Wooly Howl

Apprentice - Sandpaw

Darkstripe - Black and Grey Male Crested Sailback

Longtail - Pale cream and black male Monstrous Nightmare

Runningwind - Blue male Terrible terror

Willowpelt - Pale grey, brown and with hints of pink and green female Deadly Nadder with unusual Blue eyes

Mousetail - Small brown female Terrible Terror (Book name: Mousefur)

Short-wings

Dustpaw - Dark brown and grey striped male Changewing

Greypaw - Mixed Grey male Deadly Nadder

[image]

Ravenpaw - Scrawny black with a white chest, tail tip and fronds male Changewing

Sandpaw - Pale ginger Female Sandwraith

Firepaw - Solid black male dragon with bright Orange and red flaming eyes and unusual fire like plasma blasts

Queens

Frostfur - White and blue female Changewing

Brindleface - Red, Orange, and golden Monstrous Nightmare

Goldenflower - Golden Rumblehorn

Speckletail - Pale gold and blue older Rumblehorn

Hatchlings

Cinder - Dark grey Flamewhipper with blue eyes

Bracken - Golden brown rumblehorn with amber eyes

Bright - Orange & white Flamewhipper

Thorn - striped rumble horn with blue eyes

Swift - Black & white male Monstrous nightmare with pale amber eyes

Yak - Amber & Black male Rumblehorn

Elders

Halftail - Dark purple and grey male Terrible Terror with a partially missing tail

Smallhorn - Small male rumblehorn with tiny horns, the eldest male dragon of the clan. (Book name Smallear)

Patchpelt - Brightly colored Male Monstrous Nightmare with Patches of black and white

Oneeye - Beautiful metalic looking female Thornridge. Missing an eye, is practically blind and deaf. Oldest female dragon of the clan.

Dappletail - A dappled green, brown, and yellow Snap trapper.

Shadowclan

Titan-wing

Brokenstar - Dark Brown and red striped male Screaming Death with an unusual split jaw and broken tail.

Demi-wing

Blackfoot - Large white male Thunderpede with Black feet

Nurture-wing

Runningnose - Small Pink blue and Grey male Grapple grounder

with notoriously running nose.

Broad-wings

Stumpytail - Grey brown and green male Shovelhelm with a short tail.

Apprentice Brownpaw

Boulder - Silver and Brown male Hot burple with Matching Armor

Apprentice Wetpaw

Clawface - Battle scarred Pink and Green male Rockstomper

Apprentice Littlepaw

Nightpelt - Black with dark purple, blue and green Male Rockstomper

Short-wings

Brownpaw - Brown Male Gronckle

Wetpaw - Grey male Gronckle

Littlepaw - Light brown with Darker brown spots male Gronckle Bright blue eyes.

Queens

Dawncloud - Orange, yellow and blue female Crimson Goregutter

Brightflower - Black and White female Catastrophic Quaken

Elders

Ashfur - Thin grey Smothering Smokebreath

Riverclan

Titan-wing

Crookedstar - Bright Orange and blue male Hobblegrunt with a twisted jaw

Demi-wing

Oakheart - a Red and Brown male Hobblegrunt

Windclan

Titan-wing

Tallstar - Tall Black and White male Speedstinger with an extra long tail.

Non-clan Dragons

Yellowfang - Old dark grey female Catastrophic Quaken heavily scarred

Smudge - Dark brown and pale Brown tamed maleshort wing hot burple

Barley - A blue, black and white Hideous zipple back that lives on a nearby viking island.

Into The Wild - Ch. 0

[image]

A half-moon glowed on smooth basalt boulders, turning them silver. The silence was broken only by the ripple of water from the swift black sea and the whisper of the wind in the sea stacks beyond. There was a stirring in the shallows, and from all around lithe dark shapes crept stealthily over the rocks.

Claws, teeth and wings glinted in the moonlight. Wary eyes flashed like amber. And then, as if on a silent signal, the creatures lunged at each other. In a bright burst of flames the rocks were suddenly alive with wrestling, howling dragons.

At the center of the frenzy of scales and teeth, a massive Triplestrike pinned a red and brown male Hobblegrunt to the ground with his massive paw and drew up his head triumphantly his three tails whipping back in a distinct three clicks. "Oakheart!" the Triplestrike growled. "How dare you hunt in our territory? Sunning rocks belong to ThunderClan!"

"After tonight, Tigerclaw, this will be just another Riverclan hunting ground!" the hobblegrunt spat back his frills turning more red.

A warning yowl came from a sea stack above, shrill and anxious. "Look out! More Riverclan warriors are coming!"

Tigerclaw turned to see sleek bodies gliding above and below the water near heading quickly towards shore. The Riverclan warriors flew up the ledge silently and hurled themselves into battle without even stopping to shake water from their scales.

The two legged dragon glared down at Oakheart. "You may swim like fish, but you and your warriors do not belong in this Archipelago!" He opened his mouth readying his flame against the defenseless dragon below him.

The desperate scream of a Thunderclan female dragon rose above

the clamor. A wiry Riverclan Sandbuster had pinned the brown terrible terror flat on her belly. Now he lunged toward her neck with jaws still dripping from his swim across the river.

Tigerclaw heard the cry and let go of Oakheart. With a mighty leap, he head-butted the enemy warrior away from the terrible terror. "Quick, Mousetail, run!" he ordered, before turning on the Riverclan warrior who had threatened her. Mousetail scrambled to her paws, wincing from a deep gash on her shoulder right above her wing, and took off.

Behind her, Tigerclaw spat fire with rage at the Riverclan dragon. The male dodged and lunged forward with quick speed and sliced Tigerclaw's muzzle. Blood blinded him for an instant, but he lunged forward regardless and sank his teeth into the hind leg of his enemy. The Riverclan dragon roared and struggled free just as Tigerclaw's tail struck hitting the hard rock below.

"Tigerclaw!" The yowl came from a warrior with a tail as red as lava. "This is useless! There are too many Riverclan warriors!"

"No, Redtail. Thunderclan will never be beaten!" Tigerclaw Roared back, flying to Redtail's side.

"This is our territory!" Blood was welling around his broad black muzzle, and he shook his head impatiently, scattering scarlet drops onto the octagonal rocks.

"Thunderclan will honor your courage, Tigerclaw, but we cannot afford to lose any more of our warriors," Redtail urged. "Bluestar would never expect her warriors to fight against these impossible odds.

We will have another chance to avenge this defeat." He met Tigerclaw's amber-eyed gaze steadily, then reared away and flew onto a boulder at the edge of the island clearing.

"Retreat, Thunderclan! Retreat!" he roared spitting a bright burst of flames into the air signalling their retreat. At once his warriors squirmed and struggled away from their opponents. Spitting and snarling, they flew toward Redtail. For a heartbeat, the Riverclan

dragons looked confused. Was this battle so easily won? Then Oakheart roared a jubilant cry. As soon as they heard him, the Riverclan warriors raised their voices and joined their Demi-wing in caterwauling their victory. Lifting their heads and shooting small bursts of flames into the air.

Redtail looked down at his warriors. With a flick of his spiked tail, he gave the signal and the Thunderclan dragons lifted their wings and lifted off in a mass disappearing into the mist.

Tigerclaw followed last. He hesitated at the edge of the cliff and glanced back at the bloodstained battlefield. His face was grim, his eyes furious slits. Then he leaped after his Clan into the silent night.

In a deserted clearing, on an island shrouded in mist and covered in trees an old gray woolly howl sat alone, staring up at the clear night sky. All around her in the shadows she could hear the breathing and stirrings of sleeping dragons.

A small golden and ruby Deadly Nadder emerged from a dark corner, her paw steps quick and soundless.

The grey furry dragon dipped her head in greeting. "How is Mousetail?" she clicked.

"Her wounds are deep, Bluestar," answered the Nadder, settling herself on the night-cool grass. "But she is young and strong; she will heal quickly."

"And the others?"

"They will all recover, too."

Bluestar sighed. "We are lucky not to have lost any of our warriors this time. You are a gifted Nurture-wing, Spottedleaf." She tilted her head again and studied the stars. "I am deeply troubled by tonight's defeat. Thunderclan has not been beaten in its own territory since I became leader," she murmured. "These are difficult times for our Clan. The season of new leaf is late, and there have been fewer

hatchlings. Thunderclan needs more dragons if it is to survive."

"But the year is only just beginning," Spottedleaf pointed out calmly. "There will be more hatchlings when green-leaf comes."

The gray dragon twitched her broad wings. "Perhaps. But training our young to become Warrior Broad-wings takes time. If Thunderclan is to defend its territory, it must have new warriors as soon as possible."

"Are you asking Starclan for answers?" meowed Spottedleaf gently, following Bluestar's gaze and staring up at the swath of stars glittering in the dark sky.

"It is at times like this we need the words of the ancients to help us. Has Starclan spoken to you?" Bluestar asked.

"Not for some moons, Bluestar."

Suddenly a shooting star blazed over the treetops. Spottedleaf's tail twitched and the spikes on her tail rose. Bluestar's horns twitched but she remained silent as Spottedleaf continued to gaze upward.

After a few moments, Spottedleaf lowered her head and turned to Bluestar. "It was a message from the Ancients," she murmured. A distant look came into her eyes. "Lightning alone can save our Clan."

"Lightning?" Bluestar echoed. "But lightning is feared by all the Clans! How can it save us?" She spat flapping wings frustratedly.

Spottedleaf shook her head. "I do not know," she admitted. "But this is the message the Ancients have chosen to share with me."

The Thunderclan leader Titan-wing fixed her clear blue eyes on the medicine cat. "You have never been wrong before, Spottedleaf," she chirped. "If Starclan has spoken, then it must be so. Lightning will save our Clan."

Into the Wild Ch. 1

[image]

It was very dark. Rusty could sense something was near. The young dragon's eyes opened wide as he scanned the dense forest. This place was unfamiliar, but the strange scents drew him onward, deeper into the forest. His wings ached, longing to fly. He took off in a run. Running as fast as his four legs could carry his black body. Picking of the salty scent of the sea. Rusty twitched his minor caedyts catching the sounds of trees finding the best path and taking off in that direction.

The sound of waves crashing against rock grew louder and louder as the sea air grew stronger and the trees thinned. He spread his wings slightly getting ready to take off. Fast and fast his paws drummed silently against the ground as he broke through into the clearing. Wind whipped against his face, the salty air stung slightly at his eyes.

With one large leap he spread his wings and dove off the cliff. Air rushing past him and under his wings. At the last second he opened his tail fin and glided just above the water. Looking down at his reflection as he flew past. His bright orange eyes staring up at him. With a few powerful flaps of his wings he rose higher and higher into the sky as the sun rose over the sea. He struggled to climb higher still, to reach the clouds. He felt his wings ache as he started to fall backwards plummeting down towards the sea unable to stop himself. Rusty closed his eyes and waited to hit the hard water.

Quickly he jerked up opening his eyes. The sea had disappeared. He was inside a wooden home. Curled up on his rock bed. The fireplace beside him was cold. He looked to the sleeping child on the bed nearby. They shivered slightly under their blanket. No light shone into the room, everything was boarded up from the cold. Rusty had been dreaming.

He walked towards the viking child's bed and rested his large head on the edge of it. Watching the small being breath slowly. His

harness rubbed uncomfortably under his wings. In his dreams he had felt the freedom of flying near the ocean. The air rushing against his smooth scales where the harness usually rubbed raw. Rusty turned away trying to savor the smell of the air, for a few more moments. It was the third time since the full moon that he had that dream. Every time he fell back unable to reach the clouds.

He licked his lips. From upstairs he could smell the bucket from which he was usually fed fish, but he didn't get fed until morning after the fishermen returned. The rancid smell chased away the smell from his dream. His wings still ached he stretched and flapped them a few times. Before turning towards the fireplace and let a small plasma blast relight the wood. Instantly heating up the tiny space. He leaped towards the beams in the ceiling flapping his wings to give him the boost he needed to reach it. Carefully he balanced and walked across the beam towards the window in the roof. Nudging against it slightly it opened and some snow flitted in. Rusty sneezed as the snow itched his nose then quickly slipped out onto the roof. Sliding down and falling to the ground near the hut.

Outside, the moon was bright. It was snowing slightly. Rusty stalked down the rows of houses, following the starlit path the vikings in the village used to go from place to place. The snow crunched slightly under the paw. He wandered up towards the mountains where the village healer's home stood, and past the barn where the other Tamed dragons slept. It would be morning soon he could feel it in the light air. Rusty pressed on climbing as the path began to steepen into large rocks as he reached the mountain side. He made his way towards the abandoned lookout post. Raising his wings he took off half flying half climbing he made his way to the top. It was big enough to hold him and a few small viking children. Or maybe one large dragon. His village didn't use it anymore as they made new posts elsewhere. Rusty liked this spot, he could watch the sun rise and if he looked hard enough he thought he could see the other islands off in the distance.

The snow had stopped. Behind him, the village bathed in moonlight, but beyond this look out toward was the woods. Full of other creatures and even wild dragons. Although most stayed away he longed to see others. Rusty stretched his head forward to take a

sniff at the cold air. He was warm but he could feel the snow that rested and slowly melted against his scales.

He heard a small cry of his child off in the distance. If he went back, he would receive praises and chin scratched and maybe even a snack. He would then rest with his child until they fell asleep again. But this time Rusty ignored the cries and turned his fiery gaze back to the forest.

Suddenly the spines on his back prickled and raised. Was something moving out there? Was something watching him? Rusty stared ahead, but it was impossible to see or smell anything in the dark, three-scented air. He lifted his head boldly, stood and spread his wings. His paws gripping the wood of the lookout post as he arched his back. He closed his eyes and moved his minor caedyts, slightly twitching them as the sounds of the forest bounced off of them painting a faint image. It seemed to call him, tempting him onward into the whispering woods. Sensing his muscles and raising his wings, then quickly he leapt down. Gliding to the forest floor below. As he landed a bell on his harness jingled and rang out against the cold night air.

"Where are you off to, Rusty?" a familiar voice groaned behind him.

Rusty looked up at a young dark and light brown short-wing Hot Burple landed awkwardly on a rock nearby. His flat body sliding against its smooth surface before he fell face first into the snow. Which hissed and steamed away from his hot body.

"Hello Smudge," Rusty replied.

"You're not going to go into the woods alone, are you?" Smudge's amber eyes were huge.

"Just for a look," Rusty promised, shifting uncomfortably in the snow.

"You wouldn't get me in there. It's Dangerous!" Smudge wrinkled his long bumpy face with distaste. "Mukker said he went into the woods once." The dragon lifted his head and looked back towards the dragon's barn, where Mukker usually stayed.

"That Fat lump never went into the woods!" Rusty scoffed, "He's hardly been beyond the weapons shop. All he wants to do is eat and sleep."

"No, Really. He found some feldspar in the woods!" Smudge insisted, with a grumble from his belly thinking about the delicious rock.

"Well, if he did, then it was before he was tamed. Now he complains about having to fly from the workshop to the barn."

"Well, anyway," Smudge went on, ignoring the scorn in Rusty's voice, "Mukker told me that there are all sorts of dangerous animals out there. Huge Wild dragons who eat whole yaks for breakfast and sharpen their claws and teeth on old bones!"

"I'm only going for a look around," Rusty purred, "I won't stay long"

"Well, don't say I didn't warn you!" whined Smudge, "watch out for dragon snares too!" The young hot burple turned raising his wings and took off slowly towards his home.

Rusty sat down on the bare ground under the trees beyond his homes clearing. He flattened his caedyts against his head nervously and wondered how much of Smudge's gossip was true.

Rusty leaned back on his haunches looking out into the dark when suddenly the movement of a tiny creature caught his eyes. He watched as a small squirrel scurried through the woods. Intrigued by the furry creature Rusty took chase. His eyes trained on the small creature as it dodged through trees and over rocks and fallen logs. This was even better than his dreams!

Then suddenly the squirrel darted up a tree and into a hole. Rusty stopped at the base of the tree and looked up. His bell jangled loudly. He looked and saw a movement of a large unfamiliar viking rushing through the woods. He smelled funny, unlike anyone from his village. Rusty stood very still, until the viking moved past not having seen him. He wanted to know where he was going and what he was doing out this late.

All of Rusty's senses strained ahead as he prowled forward, after this mysterious viking. He followed it all the way to the far shore line where he got into a small boat manned by another viking and took off into the water towards a ship off in the distance. Then he detected another noise. It came from behind, but it sounded muted and distant. He pricked his minor caedyts and perked his large ears. *Pawsteps? Wing flaps?* He wondered, but he kept his eyes fixed on the strange ship and small boat leaving towards it and he continued to creep towards the shoreline. It was only when the faint rustling behind him became a loud fast approaching whoosh of wind and wing flaps. That rust realized he was in danger.

The creature him him like an explosion and Rusty was thrown sideways into some boulders. He hid his head hard dazing him momentarily. Twisting and screeching, he tried to throw off the attacker that had fastened itself to his back. It was gripping him with incredibly sharp claws and two feets. Rusty could feel spikes from a tail slashing against his wings. He writhed and squirmed from head to tail, but he couldn't free himself. For a second he felt helpless; then he froze. Thinking fast, he flipped over onto his back. He knew instinctively how dangerous it was to expose his soft belly, but it was his only chance.

He was lucky, the ploy seemed to work. With a quick plasma blast it, it hit the grey underbelly of the dragon above him that had let go as he flipped. The dragon was thrown back a few feet. He didn't wait to see any more and darted off into the woods. Sprinting back towards his village.

Behind him a rush of pawsteps told Rusty his attacker was giving chase. The steps turned into flaps. Rusty didn't need to look back to know he was now being chased by a flying dragon. Even though his back and wings stung from the cuts and claw marks. Rusty decided he would rather turn and fight than let himself be attacked again, or worse yet bring a wild dragon to his village. He skidded to a stop, spun around his back arched and jaw opened. A Plasma blast burning in the back of his throat. It whined loudly as it grew ready to fire. His bright orange plasma flame lit the clearing.

His attacker landed. It was another Shortwing like him, but a Deadly Nadder. With a multitude of grey colors, strong jaw a crown

of spines, powerful legs and a powerful tail covered with bristling spines. In a heartbeat, Rusty could tell it was another male, and sensed a power in the dragons wild eyes. Rusty let off his shot, but the Nadder dodged with ease from a single flap and jump. Rusty shot again and then once more for good measure. Hitting the dragon on both shots. Taken by surprise how quickly Rusty could fire it fell into a dazed heap after being hit near the wing. Firing so quickly took the breath out of Rusty, he knew he needed to wait a bit before he could fire again. He opened his mouth and bared his fangs, with an arched back and raised wings, ready to leap at his attacker. But the shortwing Nadder simply stood and began to preen at his wings and lowered spines. All signs of aggression are gone.

Rusty felt strangely disappointed. Every part of him was tense, ready for battle.

"Hi there, Viking Tamed!" Chirped the grey Nadder cheerily, lifting his large head, "You put up quite a fight for a viking hatched dragon."

Rusty remained on edge for a second, wondering whether to attack anyway. Then he remembered the strength and speed he observed from the other shortwing when he was pinned to the ground. He relaxed and lowered his wings and retracted his teeth, "And I'll fight you again if I have to," he growled.

"I'm Graypaw, by the way," the grey Nadder went on, ignoring Rusty's threat. "I'm training to be a Thunderclan Warrior."

Rusty remained silent. He didn't understand what his Graywhatsit was chirping on about, but he sensed the threat had passed. He hid his confusion by lowering his caedyts and narrowing his orange eyes.

"What's a Tamed Short-wing like you doing out here alone? Don't you know it's dangerous?" asked Graypaw.

"If *you're* the most dangerous thing the woods has to offer, then I think I can handle it," Rusty bluffed.

Graypaw looked up at him for a moment, narrowing his big yellow eyes. "Oh I'm far from the most dangerous. If I were even half a warrior, I'd have given an intruder like you some real wounds to think about." Rusty felt a thrill of fear at these ominous words. What did he mean by 'intruder'?

"Anyway" Squawked Graypaw, using his sharp teeth to tug a loose spine from his tail, "I didn't think it was worth hurting you. You're obviously not from one of the other Clans."

OTher Clans? Rusty echoed, confused.

Graypaw let out an impatient hiss, "You must have heard of the four Warrior clans that hunt in this Archipelago! I belong to Thunderclan. The other Clans are always trying to steal prey from our territory, especially Shadowclan. They're so fierce they would have ripped you to shreds. No questions asked.

Graypaw paused to spit angrily and continued, "They come to take prey that is rightfully ours. It's the job of the Thunderclan Warriors to keep them out of our territory. When I've finished my training, I'll be so dangerous, I" have the other Clans shaking in their scales. They won't dare come near us then!"

Rusty narrowed his amber eyes. This must be one of the wild dragons Smudge had warned him about! Living rough on other islands, hunting, fighting each other, stealing from vikings, to get every last scrap of food that they can. Yet Rusty didn't feel scared. In fact, it was hard not to admire this confident short-wing. "So you're not a warrior yet?" he asked,

"Why? Did you think I was? Graypaw purred proudly raising his head tall. "I won't be a real warrior for ages. I have to go through the training first. Hatchlings must be tiny tooths for at least six seasons before they even begin training as a short-wing. I must be broad-wing to even be considered fully trained. Tonight is my first night out as an apprentice."

"Why don't you find yourself a viking home instead? Your life would be much easier," Rusty offered, "There are plenty of Vikings who'd take in a short-wing like you. All you have to do is sit where

they can see you and look hungry for a couple of days-"

"And they'd put me in a harness like you and ride me to wherever they please, fighting their own battles with me!" Graypaw interrupted, "No way! I can't think of anything worse than being a Viking pet! They're nothing but Toys! Listening to every command, no free will, and doing all of the hard work only playing and flying when a Viking allows them too? That's no life! Out here it's wild, and it's free. We come and go as we please." He finished his speech with a lash of his tail. Pelting a nearby tree with spikes mischievously. "Until you've flown into the sunset and beyond the clouds without any restraint, you haven't lived. Have you ever flown without a viking before?

"No," Rusty admitted, a little defensively, "Not yet."

" I guess you'll never understand." Graypaw sighed. "You weren't hatched in the wild. IT makes a big difference. You need to be born with warrior blood in your veins, or the feel of wind beneath your wings. Hatchlings born into Viking villages could never feel the same way."

Rusty remembered the way he had felt in his dream, "That's not true!" He screeched indignantly.

Greypaw did not reply. He sudden;y stiffened and raised his head, cocking it sideways and sniffing the air. "I smell dragons from my Clan." He hissed, "You should go. They won't be pleased to find you in our territory!"

Rusty looked around, wondering how Graypaw knew any dragon was approaching. He couldn't smell anything different on the tree scented breeze. But his spines stood on end at the note of urgency in Graypaw's voice. "Quick!" hiss Graypaw, "Run!"

Rusty prepared to spring into the brush, not knowing which way was safe to jump.

He was too late. A voice growled behind him, firm and menacing. "What's going on here."

Rusty turned to see a large grey hairy dragon strolling majestically out into the small clearing. She was magnificent. White hairs streaked her muzzle. Two sets of large dark teal horns protruding from her large head. A large scar parted the fur across her shoulders, but her grey coat shone like silver in the moonlight.

"Bluestar!" Beside Rust, Graypaw crouched down, bowing his head. He crouched even lower when a second Dragon landed in the clearing. A large golden rumblehorn.

"You shouldn't be on this island itss so close to the Viking village, Graypaw!" Growled the golden dragon angrily, his green eyes narrowing and hot hair snorted from it's nostrils.

"I know, Lionheart, I'm sorry." Graypaw looked down at his two paws.

Rusty copied Graypaw and crouched low to the forest floor, his six caedyts twitching nervously. These dragons has an air of strength he had never seen in any of his village dragons. Maybe what Smudge had warned him about was true.

"Who is this?" Asked the female woolly howl.

Rusty flinches as she turns her gaze on him. Her piercing blue eyes made him feel even more vulnerable and powerless.

"He's no threat," mewed Graypaw quickly. "He's not another Clan Warrior, just a viking pet from this island."

Just a viking pet! The words inflamed Rusty, but he held his tongue. The warning look in Bluestar's stare told him that she had observed the anger in his eyes, and he looked away.

"This is Bluestar, she's the leader of my Clan!" Graypaw hissed to Rusty under his breath, "And Lionheart. He's my mentor, which means he's training me to be a warrior."

"Thank you for the introduction, Graypaw," Lionheart rumbled coolly.

Bluestar was still staring at Rusty, "You fight well for a viking

hatched dragon." she spoke calmly.

Rusty and Graypaw exchanged confused glances. How could she know?

"We have been watching you both," Bluestar went on as if she had read their thoughts, " We wondered how you would deal with an intruder, Graypaw. You attacked him bravely."

Graypaw looked pleased at Bluestar's praise.

"Stand up, both of you!" Bluestar commanded as she looked at Rusty. "You too, Viking pet." He sat up immediately and held Bluestar's Gaze evenly as she addressed him

"You reacted well to the attack, Viking pet. Grayaw is stronger than you, but you used your wits to defend yourself. And you turned to face him when he chased you. I've not seen a viking hatched dragon do that before."

Rusty managed to nod his thanks to the Titan-wing, taken aback by such unexpected praise. Her next words surprised him even more.

"I have been wondering how you would perform out here, beyond the Viking Village. We patrol this border island frequently, So I have often seen you sitting out on your villages edge, staring into the forest. And now, at last, you have dared to place your paws here." Bluestar stared at Rusty thoughtfully, "You do seem to have a natural fighting ability, Sharp eyes. Quick wings, and an unusual flame."

"R-really?" Rusty stammered.

Lionheart spoke now. His deep rumbling voice was respectful but insistent. "Bluestar, this is a viking hatched dragon. He should not be hunting in our woods/ Send him home to his Vikings!"

Rusty prickled at Lionheart's dismissive words. "Send me home?" He snapped impatiently. Bluestar's words had made him glow with pride. She had noticed him; she had been impressed by him. "But I've only come here to explore, I'm sure there's plenty of other islands that you can be on."

Bluestar had turned her head to acknowledge Lionheart's words. Now her gaze snapped back to Rusty. Her blue eyes were blazing with anger. "There's never enough territory to hunt on!" She screeched, "If you didn't live such a soft, overfed life, you would know that!"

Rusty was confused by Bluestar's sudden rage, but one glance at the horrified look on Graypaw's face was enough to tell him he had spoken to freely. Lionheart stepped to his leader's side. Both warriors loomed over him now. Rusty looked into Bluestar's threatening stare and his pride dissolved. These were not cozy fireside dragons he was dealing with - they were mean, hungry dragons who were probably going to finish what Graypaw had started.

Into the Wild - Ch. 2

[image]

"Well" hissed Bluestar, her lip curled back showing the rows of sharp teeth. Rusty could feel her icy breath against the black scales on his nose as she loomed over him. Lionheart remained silent as he towered over him too. Even the giant dragon looked small next to the titan-wing leader next to him.

He flattened his ears and cowered under the golden dragons cold stare. His spines prickled uncomfortably. "I am no Threat to your Clan," he replied strongly, looking down at his small black paws as they shook slightly.

"You threaten our Clan when leave your precious village. Viking will come looking for you, invading our territory, hunting our dragons, stealing our fish and our prey. The more of your kind, the more Vikings will come and take our land!" She spat ice forming in the air and in the back of her throat ready to blast. "You have plenty of space on your part of the island and the other islands your kind came from! You came here to explore but you were reckless! Did you notice how many traps you nearly sprang, and following that dragon hunter! If he finds you, he will return with hundreds of men, just for your pelt!"

The truth of the Titan-wing's words pierced Rusty like his own teeth through a fish, and suddenly he understood her anger. He stopped trembling, sat up, and straightened his caedyts. He raised his fiery eyes to meet hers. "I had not thought of it that way before. I am sorry," He purred solemnly. "I will not fly here again."

Bluestar swallowed her blast and signaled to Lionheart to step back. "You are an unusual dragon, Rusty."

Graypaw's sigh of relief made Rusty's ears twitch. He heard the approval in Bluestar's voice and noticed as she swapped a meaningful glance with Lionheart. The look made him curious. What flashed between the two warriors? Quietly he asked, "Is

survival here really so hard?"

"Our territory covers only part of the archipelago," answered Bluestar. "We compete with other clans for what we have. And this year, late new leaf means prey is scarce. Fish are deeper in the waters, ice still covers part of the bay."

"Is your Clan very big?" Rusty barked, his eyes wide.

"Big enough," Replied Bluestar. "Our territory can support us, but there is no prey left over."

"Are you all warriors, then?" Rusty warbled. Bluestar's guarded answers were just making him more and more curious.

Lionheart answers him. "Some are warriors. Some are too young or too old or too busy caring for hatchlings to hunt."

"And you all live and share prey together?" Rusty Murmured in awe, thinking a little guiltily of his own easy, selfish life.

Bluestar looked again at Lionheart. The golden rumblehorn stared back at her steadily. Almost as if they were communicating in a way beyond which Rusty could understand. His smaller lower ears twitched slightly straining to understand. At last she returned her gaze to Rusty and spoke slowly, "Perhaps you should find out these things for yourself. Would you like to join Thunderclan?"

Rusty was so surprised, he couldn't speak.

Bluestar went on; "If you did, you would train with Graypaw until you were a broad-wing to become a clan warrior."

"But Viking Pets can't be warriors!" Graypaw blurted out, flapping his wings in protest. "They don't have warrior blood!"

A sad look clouded Bluestar's eyes. "Warrior blood," she echoed with a sigh. "Too much of that has been spilled lately."

Bluestar fell silent and Lionheart chuffed, "Bluestar is only offering you training, young short-wing. There is no guarantee you would become a full warrior. It might prove too difficult for you. After all,

you are used to a comfortable life."

Rusty was stung by Lionheart's words. He swing his head around to look at the golden dragon, "Why offer me the chance, then?"

But it was Bluestar who answered. "You are right to question our motives, young one. The fact is, Thunderclan needs more warriors."

"Understand that Bluestar does not make this offer lightly," Warned Lionheart, "If you wish to train with us, we will have to take you into our Clan. You must either wive with us and respect our ways, or return to your Viking Village and never come back. You cannot live with a wing in each world."

A cool breeze stirred the loose snow dusting the ground, ruffling Rusty's spines and under his rudder wings. He shivered, not with the cold, but with excitement at the incredible possibilities opening up in front of him.

"Are you wondering if it's worth giving up your comfortable Viking pet life?" Asked Bluestar gently. "But do you realize the price you will pay for your warmth and food?"

Rusty looked at her, puzzled. Surely his encounter with these cats had proved to him just how easy and luxurious his life was.

"You already wear a harness, how long until the muzzle you, how long until they turn you from their toy to their weapon?" She sneered, "I can still smell their scent on you, it clings to your scales. You still have your own free will."

"What do you mean?" Rusty echoed a sinking feeling in his chest.

"There are viking out there that use dragons to fight their own wars, to fight us, to trap our kind, and kill our kind."

Rusty was confused. He suddenly thought of the strange viking ship he had seen earlier, and the break in from the hatchery last moon,

"The clan may not be able to offer you such easy food or warmth," continued Bluestar, "In the season of Leaf bare, nights in are cruel. The clan will demand great loyalty and hard work. You will be

expected to protect the Clan with you life if necessary. And there are many mouths to feed. But the rewards are great. You will remain free, you will be trained in the ways of the wild. You will learn what it is to be a real dragon. The strength and the fellowship of the Clan will always be with you, even when you fly alone."

"Rusty's head reeled. Bluestar seemed to be offering him the life he had lived so many times, and so tantalizingly, in his dreams, but could he live like that for real?

Lionheart interrupted his thoughts, "Come, Bluestar, let's not waste any more time here. We must be ready to join the other patrol at moon high. Tigerclaw will wonder what has become of us." He unfurled his wings and flicked his tail expectantly.

"Wait!' Rusty cried, his heart pounding, "There's, there's a vikings ship. I was following a strange viking before Graypaw attacked me. I didn't recognize them, and there was an attack on our hatchery last moon."

Bluestar's eyes narrowed as she perked up quickly, "It wasn't a ship of your village?" She questioned exchanging glances with Lionheart, "Go home, rest. Make your choice. Meet here tomorrow at sun high. Lionheart will meet you here if you choose to join us." With a single nod and a large wing flap the three disappeared into the night sky.

Rusty blinked. He stared - excited, uncertain - up past the trees that encircled him. Through the canopy of leaves and bushes, to the stars that glittered in the clear sky. The scent of the Clan dragons hung heavy in the evening air. And as Rusty turned and headed for home, he felt a strange sensation inside him, tugging him back into the edge of the forest, out towards the sea. His spines prickled deliciously in the light wind, and the rustling branches seemed to whisper his name into the shadows.

Into the Wild - Ch. 3

***A/N** : Please recheck out the prologue if you read it before 03/10/2020 I recently updated it to change things to fit with this AU. For for that don't want to read, The change was changing '**fire alone will save our clan**' to '**Lightning alone will save our clan**' . I also have added a new word. Replacing ears with Caedyts. Please let me know what you think of this, and vote if you liked the story and want to see more!*

That morning, as Rusty slept off his night's wanderings, the dream came again, even more vivid than before. Free of his harness, beneath the sky, above the sea he flew. But this time he wasn't flying alone. Up above in the clouds he saw dozens of shadows. The Clan dragons had entered his dream world.

Rusty woke, blinking in the bright sunshine that was streaming in from the front door. His wings felt heavy, the sun warmed his scales. His food bucket had some fish in it now, and his water bucket rinsed out and filled with melted snow. Rusty preferred to drink from the sea as the bucket water tasted of metal and wood, but when it was hot, or he was very thirsty, he had to admit it was easier to lap up the water. Could he really abandon this comfortable life? Is it true that it wouldn't last?

He ate, then walked out the door and into the village. The day promised to be warm, and the garden was heavy with the smell of early blossoms and mud.

"Hello, Rusty!" Groaned a voice from down the path. It was Smudge. "You should have been awake an hour ago. The Fishermen brought in some salmon!"

"Did you eat any?" Rusty asked.

Smudge yawned and licked his nose. "Couldn't be bothered. I'd

already eaten enough boulders at home. Anyway, why weren't *you* out earlier? Yesterday you were complaining about Mukker sleeping his time away, and today you're not much better yourself."

Rusty sat down on the cool earth beside a supply hut and curled his long black tail neatly over his front paws. "I was in the woods last night," He reminded his friend. At once he felt the blood stir in his veins and his muscles stiffen.

Smudge looked down at him, his eyes wide. "Oh, yes, I forgot! How was it? Did you catch anything? Or did anything catch you?"

Rusty paused, not sure how to tell his old friend what had happened. "I met some wild dragons," he began.

"What!" Smudge was clearly shocked, despite his lazy attitude. "Did you get into a fight?"

"Sort of." Rusty could feel the energy surging through his body again as he recalled the strength and power of the clan dragons.

"Were you hurt? What happened?" Smudge prompted him eagerly.

"There were three of them. Bigger and stronger than any of us."

"And you fought all three of them!" Smudge interrupted, his large tail wagging excitedly knocking over a barrel. As his small wings flapped and buzzed.

"No!" Rusty admitted hastily. "Just the youngest one, the other two came later. One was a titan-wing!"

"How come they didn't shred you to pieces?"

"They just warned me to leave their territory. But then..." Rusty hesitated.

"What!" Burped Smudge impatiently.

"They asked me to join their Clan."

Smudge's bulbs quivered and shook looking like they might

explode, "Really?" He asked disbelievingly.

"They did!" Rusty insisted.

"Why would they do that?"

"I don't know," Rusty admitted. "I think they need extra claws in their clan."

"Sounds a bit odd to me," Smudge mewed doubtfully. "I wouldn't trust them if I were you."

Rusty looked at Smudge. His hot burple friend had never shown any interest in venturing into the woods or going out to sea. He was perfectly content living with his viking family. He would never understand the restless longing that Rusty's dreams stirred in him night after night. Longing to fly, to explore.

"But I do trust them," Rusty purred softly, "and I've made up my mind. I'm going to join them."

Smudge scrambled to his feet and flew in front of Rusty. "Please don't go, Rusty." He grunted in alarm. "I might never see you again."

Rusty nudged him affectionately with his head. "Don't worry. My viking family will get another hatchling, there's a new egg nearing hatching any day now. You'll get on with him fine. You get along with everyone!"

"But it won't be the same!" Smudge wailed.

Rusty twitched his tail impatiently. "That's just the point. If I stay around here I won't be the same either."

Smudge looked puzzled.

"I'm not like you Smudge, you get to help make their weapons, their fires, I am their weapon!"

Smudge looked away, "But they have other dragons besides dragons like me and Rukker."

Rusty felt his heart fill with sadness at the thought of leaving his friend. "I'm sorry, Smudge. I'll miss you, but I have to go."

Smudge didn't reply, but stepped forward and gently nuzzled his thick bumpy snout against Rusty's shoulder, "Fair enough. I can see I can't stop you, but at least lets spend one more morning together."

Rusty found himself enjoying the morning even more than usual, visiting his old haunts with smudge, sharing words with the other dragons he had grown up with. Every one of his senses felt super charged, as if he were poised on top a sea stack ready to leap. As sun high approached, Rusty grew more and more impatient to see if Lionheart would really be waiting for him. The idle buzz of grunts, chirps and growls from his old friends seemed to fade into the background as all his senses strained toward the woods.

Rusty took off towards the mountain and flew towards the other side of the island. He had said his good-byes to Smudge. Now all his thoughts were focused on the sea and the warriors who lived beyond his island.

As he approached the cliff bay he slowed his wing flaps. Floating against the air holding still, he tasted the air. Tall trees shielded the ground below where he had walked last night. He could smell the dragons scent on the air, but he couldn't tell if it was old or new. He dove down silently bringing his wings close to his body and slipped between the branches and landing on the melting snow beneath.

"You have a lot to learn," grunted a deep voice. "Even the tiniest Clan hatchling knows when another dragon is nearby." Rusty saw a pair of green eyes glinting from behind some large bushes. Now he recognized the scent; it was Lionheart.

"Can you tell if I am alone?" asked the large smooth plated dragon, stepping into the light.

Hastily, Rusty sniffed again. The scents of Bluestar and Graypaw wee still there, but not as strong as the previous night. Hesitantly, he chirped, "Bluestar and Graypaw aren't with you this time."

"That's right," snorted Lionheart. "But someone else is."

Rusty stiffened as a second dragon landed into the clearing.

"This is Whitestorm," rumbled Lionheart, "One of Thunderclan's senior warriors."

Rusty looked at the white furry dragon and felt his spine tingle with cold fear. Was this a trap? Long wings and tail, muscular, Whitestorm stood in front of Rusty and gazed down at him with yellow eyes like sun baked sand. He was the same kind of dragon as Bluestar. Another woolly howl, but he was smaller and didn't have any horns, but he was still huge compared to Rusty. Rusty crouched and flattened his ears warily, dropping his fangs into his mouth ready to fight.

Relax, before your fear scent brings unwanted attention," growled Lionheart. "We are here only to take you to our camp."

Rusty sat very still, hardly daring to breathe, as Whitestorm leaned down giving him a curious sniff.

"Hello, young one," murmured the white dragon. "I've heard a lot about you."

Rusty dipped his head in greeting, retracting his teeth and giving a toothless smile.

"Come, we can speak more once we are in the camp," ordered Lionheart, and, without pausing, he and Whitestorm leaped into the air. Rusty leapt to his paws and into the air flapping his wings frantically to follow as quickly as he could. The two warriors made no allowances for Rusty as they sped over the island and towards the sea, and before long he was struggling to keep up. Their pace barely slowed as they led him through sea stacks that they weaved through with ease, but which Rusty crashed and leapt off of unused to navigating in such quick turns. They passed through a graveyard of crashed ships, over several smaller islands and through a thick dense fog which the older dragons didn't even slow before entering.

Rusty had never flown through fog before. But he was determined not to show any signs of weakness, so he narrowed his eyes and pushed forward. His two sets of minor caedyts twitching and

vibrating picking up each wing flap from the two dragons in front of him as he followed.

At last they broke through the fog clearing and Lionheart and Whitestorm landed on a sea stack just beyond an island shore. Rusty skidded to a half on the sea stack digging in his claws to stop him from sliding right off the other edge.

"We are very close to our camp now, This is our home island." Lionheart informed Rusty. The island was bigger than him old home and was covered in broad leaf trees that had fallen this time of year, covered in melting snow. A large river led from the sea inland and a mountain pass blocked the rest of the island from sight.

Rusty strained to see any signs of life, but he saw none.

"Use your nose. You must be able to scent it," growled Whitestorm impatiently.

Rusty closed his eyes and sniffed. Whitestorm was right. The scents here were very different from the scent of the dragons he was used to. The air smelled stronger, speaking of many, many different dragons.

He nodded thoughtfully and announced, "I can smell dragons."

Lionheart and Whitestorm exchanged amused looks.

"There will come a time, if you are accepted into the Clan, when you will know each Dragon scent by name," Lionheart snorted. "Follow me!" He raised his large wings and took off gliding down into the tall trees into a small valley and through a dark narrow cave. Rusty followed, and Whitestorm took up the rear. As his wings brushed up against a cave wall, Rusty looked at the cave floor below, it was smooth as if it had been walked by thousands of different dragons. This cave must be the main entrance to the camp, he thought.

Beyond the tunnel, a clearing opened up. The clearing was large and surrounded by mountain on all four sides. It has many old burn marks, and claw treads. This camp had been here a long time. The

clearing was dappled by sunshine, and the air felt warm and still.

Rusty looked around, his eyes wide. There were dragons everywhere, sitting alone or in groups, sharing food or sitting quietly as they preened one another.

"Just after sun high, when the day is hottest, is a time for sharing flames," Lionheart explained.

"Sharing flames?" Rusty echoed.

"Clan dragons always spend time preening each other and sharing the news of the day," Whitestorm told him, "We call it sharing flames. It is a custom that binds the members of the Clan together."

The dragons had obviously smelled Rusty's foreign scent, for heads began to turn and stare curiously in his direction.

Suddenly shy of meeting any dragon's gaze directly, Rusty looked around the clearing. It was edged with bushes and a few trees, dotted with large boulders, and a several cave entrances. The mountains surrounded the camp shielding it from the rest of the island.

"Over there," rumbled Lionheart, motioning with a wing toward a deep dark hole in the ground with several boulders surrounding the area like a fence, "Is the nursery, where our eggs, hatchlings and tiny tooths are cared for by queen dragons."

Rusty swiveled his major caedyts towards the cave. He couldn't see into the dark tunnel but he could hear the cries of several hatchlings from somewhere inside. As he watched, a pale golden rumblehorn flew out of the hole landing on some of the large boulders. *That must be one of the queens,* Rusty thought.

A red, orange and gold monstrous nightmare crawled down the cliff side. The two female dragons exchanged friendly wing flaps and a nuzzle before the monstrous nightmare slipped into the darkness murmuring to the squealing hatchlings.

"The care of our hatchlings is shared by all of the queens," grunted Lionheart. "All dragons serve the Clan. Loyalty to the Clan is the

first law in our warrior code. A lesson you must learn quickly if you wish to stay with us."

"Here comes Bluestar," chuffed Whitestorm, sniffing the air.

Rusty sniffed the air too, and was pleased that he was able to recognize the scent of the grey titan-wing a moment before she appeared from a ledge high up in the cliff on the far side of the clearing.

"He came," Bluestar purred, addressing the warriors as she landed.

Whitestorm replied, "Lionheart was convinced he would not."

Rusty noticed Bluestar's horns twitch impatiently. "Well, what do you think of him?" she asked.

"He kept up well on the return journey, despite his puny size," Whitestorm admitted. "He certainly seems strong for a viking hatched."

"So it is agreed?" Bluestar looked at Lionheart and Whitestorm.

Both dragons nodded.

"Then I shall announce his arrival to the clan." Bluestar leaped up onto the ledge and howled, "Let all those dragons old enough to fly beyond the ridge join here beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting."

Her clear call brought all the dragons swarming towards her emerging like liquid shadows from the edges of the clearing. Rusty stayed where he was, Flanked by Lionheart and Whitestorm. The other dragons settled themselves below the Highrock and looked up expectantly up at their leader.

Rusty felt a rush of relief as he recognized Graypaw's grey spikes among the other dragons. Beside him sat a young brightly colored deadly nadder. She was splashed in ruby red and gold markings surrounded by a unique dappled pattern of soot scales. Her dark spikes seemed dipped in gold creating a beautiful crown atop her head. The white of her paws stood out against the color of the rest

of her. A large dragon Rusty didn't recognize stood crouched behind them on two powerful legs. He had a broad head and a large sail on his back. His scaled were grey with dark grey stripes that looked like shadows of trees on a moonlit forest floor.

When the dragons were quiet, Bluestar spoke. "Thunderclan needs more warriors," she began. "Never before have we had so few short-wings in training. It has been decided that Thunderclan will take in an outsider to train as a warrior ...."

Rusty heard indignant mutterings and snorting erupt among the Clan dragons, but Bluestar silenced them with an ice blast to the air. It exploded loudly and small bits of ice and snow fell upon the now quiet dragons. "I have found a dragon who is willing to become an apprentice of Thunderclan.

"*Lucky* to become an apprentice!" caterwauled a loud voice above the ripple of shock that spread through the flock.

Rusty craned his neck leaning back onto his hind legs to see who spoke. A pale cream and black monstrous nightmare stood on his hind legs, his head held high as he glared defiantly at the leader.

Bluestar ignored the young broad-wing and addressed all of her Clan. "Lionheart and Whitestorm have met this young dragon, and they agree with me that we should train him with the other apprentices."

Rusty fell back to his four paws as Bluestar spoke, then looked up at Lionheart, then back at the Clan. To find all eyes were on him now. His scales prickled and he swallowed nervously. There was silence for a moment. Rusty was sure they must all be able to hear his heart pulsing and smell his fear-scent.

Now a deafening crescendo of roars rose from the crowd.

"Where does he come from?"

"Which Clan does he belong to?"

"What kind of dragon is he?"

"What a strange scent he carries! That's not the scent of any Clan *I* Know!"

Then one howl in particular sounded out above the rest. "Look at his harness! He's a Viking pet!" It was the pale monstrous nightmare again. "Once a Viking pet, always a Viking pet. This clan needs wild born warriors to defend it, not another soft mouth to feed."

Lionheart bent down and hissed into Rusty's caedyt, "That dragon is Longtail. He smells your fear. They all do. You must prove to him and the other dragons that your fear won't hold you back."

But Rusty couldn't move. How could he ever prove to these fierce dragons that he wasn't just a Viking pet?

The young Broad-wing continued to jeer at him. "Your harness is a mark of the Vikings, and that noisy jingling will make you a poor hunter at best. At worst, it will bring the vikings into our territory, looking for their poor lost baby dragon who fills the archipelago with his pitiful tinkling."

All the dragons roared in agreement.

Longtail went on, well aware that he had the support of his audience. "The noise of your treacherous bell will alert our enemies, even if your Viking *Stench* doesn't!"

Rusty still did not move. But this time he was trying to pinpoint Liontail's position. There he was, behind a large black and white dragon. Rusty flattened his caedyts, narrowed his eyes and, growling leaped through the startled dragons to fling himself onto his tormentor.

Longtail was completely unprepared for Rusty's attack. He staggered backwards, losing his footing on the hard-baked earth. Filled with rage and desperate to prove himself, Rusty leapt off of the dragon taking a few wing flaps away and strike with two plasma blasts to the face before diving again at the much larger dragon. No subtle rituals of circling, dancing or flairing preceded this fight. The two dragons were locked in a fiery, writhing tussle that flipped and somersaulted around the clearing at the heart of the camp. The

other dragons had to spring out of the way to avoid the screeching whirlwind of wings and claws.

As Rusty scratched and bit, he was suddenly aware that he felt no fear, only exhilaration. Through the roaring of the blood in his veins, he could hear the dragons around them wailing with excitement.

Then Rusty felt his harness tighten around his body and pressing against his neck. Liontail had gripped it between his teeth. Violently Longtail shook Rusty back and forth. Unable to breathe, he started to panic. He writhed and twisted, but each movement only made the pressure worse. Retching and gulping for air and his body was whipped side to side. He summoned up all his strength and tried to pull away from Longtail's grip.

Rusty felt a tingling feeling well up as the air around them turned dry. A high pitched squeal pierced the air as lightning popped and crackled down his spine and suddenly with a loud bang and a bright orange and blue flash, he was free.

Longtail was thrown backwards from the blast. Rusty scrambled to his paws and looked around. Longtail was crouching dazed three terror lengths away. Caught in Longtail's mouth, Rusty saw his harness, mangled and burnt. At once, Bluestar leaped down from the Highrock and silenced the noisy crowd with a thunderous blast of ice. Rusty and Longtail remained fixed to the spot, gasping for breath. Scales lay askew on the ground. Rusty could feel a cut stinging above his eye. Longtail's left top horn was broken, and blood dripped down his lean shoulder near his wings onto the dusty ground. They stared at each other, their hostility not yet spent.

Bluestar stepped forward and took the harness from Longtail. She placed it on the ground in front of her and declared, "The newcomer has lost his Viking harness in a battle for his honor. The ancients have spoken their approval - this dragon has been released from the hold of his viking owners, and is free to join Thunderclan as an apprentice.

Rusty looked at Bluestar and solemnly nodded his acceptance. He stood up and stepped forward into a shaft of sunshine, welcoming

the warmth on his sore muscles. The pool of light blazed bright against his orange eyes. He opened his mouth and shot off two plasma blasts in celebration. Rusty turned his gaze proudly to the dragons that surrounded him. This time no one argued or jeered. He had shown himself to be a worthy opponent in battle.

Bluestar approached Rusty and placed the shredded harness on the ground in front of him. She touched his forehead gently with her nose. "Your eyes are like fire in this sunlight," she murmured. His harness crackled with electricity and her eyes flashed briefly, as if she knew something about Rusty that he did not know. "You have fought well." Then she turned to the Clan and announced, "From this day forward, until he has earned his warrior name, this apprentice will be called Firepaw, in honor of his flame-colored eyes."

She stepped back and, with the other dragons, waited silently for his next move. Without hesitating, Rusty turned and blasted him harness to ash.

Longtail growled and limped out of the clearing towards a shaded corner with another ground cave covered mostly by brush. The dragons split into groups, chattering to each other excitedly.

"Hey, Firepaw!"

Rusty heard Graypaw's friendly squawk behind him. *Firepaw!* A thrill of pride surged through him at the sound of his new name. He turned to greet the grey nadder apprentice with a welcoming wing flap.

"Great fight, Firepaw!" mewed Graypaw. "Especially for a Viking hatched! Longtail is a warrior although he only finished his training two seasons ago. That broken horn won't let him forget you in a hurry. You've spoiled his good looks, that's for sure."

"Thanks, Graypaw," Firepaw replied. "He put up quite a fight, though!" He swiped a paw over his deep scratch that stung above his eye. As he washed he heard his new name again, echoing among the roars of the clan.

"Firepaw!"

"Hey, Firepaw!"

"Welcome, young Firepaw!"

Firepaw closed his eyes for a moment and let the voices wash over him.

"Good name, too!" Graypaw mewed approvingly, jolting him awake.

Firepaw looked around. "Where did Longtail creep off to?"

"I think he was heading towards Spottedleaf's den." Graypaw tipped his crowned head toward the fern covered cave Longtail had disappeared into. "She's our nurture-wing. Not bad-looking either. Younger and a lot prettier than most-"

A low yowl next to the two dragons stopped Graypaw midspeach. They both turned, and Firepaw recognized the powerful black and grey dragon who had stood in front of Longtail earlier.

"Darkstripe," Mewed Graypaw, dipping his head respectfully.

The large muscular dragon looked at Firepaw for a moment. "Lucky your harness snapped when it did. Longtail is a young warrior, but I can't imagine him being beaten by a Viking pet!" He spat the word *Viking pet* scornfully, then turned and flew off.

"Now Darkstripe," Graypaw hissed to Firepaw under breath, "is neither young, nor pretty...."

Firepaw was about to agree with his new friend when he was interrupted by a warning cry from an old grey rumblehorn laying at the edge of the clearing.

"Smallhorn smells trouble!" Graypaw meowed, immediately alert, his spikes standing on end.

Firepaw barely had time to look around before a young dragon crashed through the cavernous entrance into camp. He was a skinny changewing and apart from the white tip of his long thin tail and

tendrils - jet black from head to toe similar to Rusty.

Graypaw gasped. "That's Ravenpaw! Why is he alone? Where's Tigerclaw?"

Firepaw looked at Ravenpaw staggering across the floor of the clearing. He was panting heavily. He was covered in dirt and his eyes were wild with fear.

"Who are Ravenpaw and Tigerclaw?" Firepaw whispered to Graypaw, as several other dragons raced past him to greet the new arrival.

"Ravenpaw's an apprentice, a short-wing changewing. Tigerclaw's his mentor, a broad-wing triple stryke," Graypaw explained quickly. "Ravenpaw went out with Tigerclaw and Redtail at Sunrise on a mission against Riverclan, the lucky fireball!"

"Redtail?" Firepaw echoed, thoroughly confused by all these names.

"Bluestar's deputy," hissed Graypaw. "But why on earth has Ravenpaw come back alone?" he added to himself. He lifted his head to listen as Bluestar stepped forward.

"Ravenpaw?" the leader spoke calmly, but a look of worry clouded her blue eyes. The other dragons drew back, flapping their wings with anxiety.

"What has happened?" Bluestar flew up to Highrock and looked down at the trembling short-wing. "Speak, Ravenpaw!"

Ravenpaw was still struggling for breath, and his sides heaved fitfully while the dust around him turned red with blood, but still he managed to scramble up onto the Highrock and stand beside Bluestar. He turned to the crowd of eager faces that surrounded him. For a moment he disappeared as he cloaked himself but quickly he reappeared as he summoned enough breath to declare, "Redtail is dead!"

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[image]

Shocked howls rose from the Clan dragons and echoed through the island.

Ravenpaw staggered and disappeared slightly. His right foreleg glistened, wet with blood that stayed while the rest of him turned invisible. The blood ran from a deep gash on his shoulder. "We m-met five Riverclan warriors beside the cliffs from sunning rock island," he reappeared as he spoke and went on shakily. "Oakheart was among them."

"Oakheart!" Graypaw gasped beside Firepaw. "He is the Demi-wing of Riverclan."

"Demi-wing?" Firepaw echoed. He had heart of Titan-wings before but never a Demi-wing.

"They are our deputies, they train hard and have passed the first trial to becoming a Titan-wing. Traveling to Vanaheim and back. Oakheart was one of them. He is the greatest warriors in this archipelago. Lucky Ravenpaw! Wish it could have been me. I'd have really-" Graypaw was silenced by a fierce glance from the old grey Rumblehorn who had first sensed Ravenpaw's return.

Firepaw turned his attention back to Ravenpaw. His mind swirling with so many new things.

"Redtail warned Oakheart to keep his hunting parties out of Thunderclan territory. He said the next Riverclan warrior to be caught in Thunderclan territory would be killed, but Oak... Oakheart would not back down. He said his Cl-clan had to be fed, whatever we threatened." Ravenpaw paused to wheeze for breath. His wound was still bleeding heavily, and he stood awkwardly to keep the weight off his shoulder.

"That's when the Riverclan dragons attacked. It was hard to see

what was happening. The fighting was vicious. I saw Oakheart had Redtail pinned to the ground, but then Redtail..." Suddenly Ravenpaw's eyes rolled in his head and he lurched sideways. His wings flailed awkwardly as he fell to the ground below Highrock.

The female golden rumblehorn flew forward, crouching by his side. She sniffed at his shoulder and licked his cheek briefly before calling out, "Spottedleaf!"

Out of the fern covered cave ran the pretty ruby deadly nadder Firepaw had noticed beside Graypaw earlier. She hurried over to Ravenpaw and squawked for the queen to stand back. Then she used her golden nose horn to roll the short-wing changewing over so that she could take a good look at the wound. She stood up and reassured, "It's all right, Goldenflower, his wounds aren't fatal. But I'll need to seal the wound to stop the bleeding.

Spottedleaf opened her jaw and a bright white beam of fire hit the back of Ravenpaw burning the wound shut. A hushed silence had fallen over the crowd but was quickly broken by a mournful howl. All eyes turned to the direction it had come from.

A massive dark dragon slowly flew into the clearing from the entrance tunnel. Between his large black talons the warrior held not prey, but the lifeless body of another dragon. He dragged the tattered Nadder into the center of the clearing.

Firepaw craned his neck and glimpsed a flash of bright ginger spiked tail hanging limply in the dust.

Shock rippled through the Clan like a chill breeze. Beside Firepaw, Graypaw dropped into a crouch as grief swept over him. "Redtail!"

"How did this happen, Tigerclaw?" demanded Bluestar from her position on the Highrock.

Tigerclaw let the body of the Nadder named Redtail fall from his taloned feet then landed beside the body. He looked steadily up at Bluestar. "He died with honor, struck down by Oakheart. I couldn't save him, but I managed to take Oakheart's life while he was still

gloating over his victory." Tigerclaw's voice was strong and deep. "Redtail's death was not in vain, for I doubt we'll see Riverclan hunters in our territory again."

Firepaw glanced at Graypaw. The apprentice's eyes were dark with sadness.

After a moment's pause, several of the dragons moved forward to Redtail's bedraggled body with his broken wings. Gently breathing a soft fire onto his scaled body as they purred hushed phrases to the dead warrior.

Graypaw didn't take his eyes off the dead dragon as he replied. "His spirit may have left to join Starclan, but the Clan will ready his body for the ancients. We give him a bit of our fire as a bit of our spirit to aid his spirit on his journey to Vanahiem. Sharing our flame one last time."

"Starclan, Ancients, Vanahiem?" Firepaw was thoroughly confused.

"Starclan is the tripe of heavenly warriors that watches over all Clans. You can see them in Silverpelt."

Firepaw still looked confused, so Graypaw continued to explain. "Silverpelt is that thick band of stars you see each night stretching across the sky. Each star is a Starclan warrior. Ancients are a few special dragons, some who were resurrected and other who speak directly to our Nurture-wings. Some are resurrected as dragons that guard Vanahiem, the resting place of all dragons. Redtail will be among the Ancients tonight."

Firepaw nodded, and Graypaw stepped forward to share his flame with his dead deputy.

Bluestar had remained silent while the first dragons came to pay their respects to Redtail. Now she flew down from the Highrock and walked slowly towards Redtail's body. The other dragons retreated and watched as their leader crouched down to share her flame with her old félagi one last time.

When she had finished she raised her head and spoke. Her voice

was low and thick with grief, and the Clan listened in silence. "Redtail was a brave warrior. His loyalty to Thunderclan could never be doubted. I always relied on his judgement, for it bore witness to the needs of the Clan, and was never swayed by self-interest or pride. He would have made a fine leader."

Then she lowered herself onto her belly, her head bowed, her paws stretched neatly before her, and silently she grieved for her lost friend. Several other dragons came and lay down beside her, their bowed heads and hunched backs echoing her mournful pose.

Firepaw watched. He had not known Redtail, but he couldn't help feeling moved as he witnessed the Clan mourn.

Graypaw came and stood beside him again. "Dustpaw will be sad," he remarked.

"Dustpaw?"

"Redtail's apprentice. That dark brown and grey changewing over there. I wonder who his new mentor will be?"

Firepaw glanced over at the short-wing changewing who lay near Redtail's body, staring unseeing at the ground. Firepaw looked past him to the Clan leader. "How long will Bluestar lay with him?" he asked.

"Probably the whole night," replied Graypaw. "Redtail was her deputy for many, many seasons. She won't want to let him go too quickly. He was one of the best warriors. Not as big and powerful as Tigerclaw or Lionheart, but quick and clever."

Firepaw looked at Tigerclaw, admiring the strength in his powerful muscles and large wings folded close to his body but didn't fold all the way like the nadder's instead they loomed out as if he was about to take at a drop of a scale. His three tails waved and bounced like restless snakes poised to strike. His massive body showed signs of his warrior life. One of his horns was split into a deep vee shape, and a thick scar sliced the bridge of his muzzle. His wings ragged and scarred like old sails from a ship.

Suddenly Tigerclaw stood up. His three tails twining together to one as he stalked over to Ravenpaw. Spottedleaf was crouched beside Tigerclaw's wounded apprentice on one leg, using the other and her jaw to press herbed into his shoulder wound. Firepaw leaned toward Graypaw and asked, "What's Spottedleaf doing?"

"Treating the wound so it doesn't get infected. It looked like a nasty cut. And RAvenpaw seemed really shaken up. He's always been a bit jumpy, but I've never seen him this bad before. Let's go and see if he's woken up yet."

They made their way through the grieving clan towards the spot where Ravenpaw lay and settled themselves a respectful distance away to wait until Tigerclaw had finished speaking.

"So, Spottedleaf." Tigerclaw addressed the marbled nadder with a confident click. "How is he? Do you think you can save him? I've spent a lot of time training him up, and I don't want my efforts to be wasted at the first battle."

Spottedleaf didn't look up from her patient as she replied. "Yes, a pity if, after all your valuable training, he dies in his first fight, eh?" Firepaw could hear a teasing purr in her soft squawk.

"Will he live?" Tigerclaw demanded.

"Of course. He just needs to rest."

Tigerclaw snorted and looked down at the motionless black shape. He jabbed Ravenpaw with one of his clawed arms. "Come on, then! Get up!"

Ravenpaw didn't move.

"Look at his claws!" Firepaw hissed shocked at his pincer like claws.

"Too right!" replied Graypaw with feeling. "I know *I* wouldn't want to get into a fight with him."

"Not so fast, Tigerclaw!" Spottedleaf placed a wing over Tigerclaw's sharp pincer and gently moved it away. "This apprentice needs to keep as still as possible until the cut has healed. We don't want him

opening his wound by jumping about trying to please you. Leave him alone."

Firepaw found himself holding his breath as he waited for Tigerclaw's reaction. He guessed that few cats dared to give orders to the warrior like that. The big dragon stiffened, his tail raised slightly and seemed about to speak when Spottedleaf chirped teasingly, "Even *you* know better than to argue with a medicine cat, Tigerclaw."

Tigerclaw's eyes flashed at the little Nadder's words. "I wouldn't dare argue with *you*, dear Spottedleaf," he purred. He turned to leave and caught sight of Graypaw and Firepaw. "Who's this?" he asked Graypaw, towering above them.

"He's the new apprentice," Graypaw mewed.

"He smells like a Viking pet!"Snorted the warrior.

"I *was* a viking's dragon," Firepaw trilled boldly, "but I am going to train to be a warrior."

Tigerclaw looked at him with sudden interest. "Ah, yes. Now I remember. Bluestar mentioned that she had stumbled across some stray Viking pet. So she's actually going to try you out, is she?"

Firepaw sat up very straight, anxious to impress this distinguished Clan warrior. "That's right," he clicked respectfully.

Tigerclaw eyed him thoughtfully. "Then I shall watch your progress with interest."

Fire[aw puffed his chest out proudly as Tigerclaw stalked away. "Do you think he liked me?"

"I don't think Tigerclaw *likes* any apprentices!" whispered Graypaw.

Just then Ravenpaw stirred and his long vine like tendrils flicked. "Has he gone?" he mumbled.

"Who? Tigerclaw?" replied Graypaw, trotting toward him. "Yep, he's gone."

"Hi, there," Firepaw began, about to introduce himself.

"Go away, both of you!" Spottedleaf protested with a flap of her brightly colored wings. "How am I meant to help this short-wing with all these interruptions!" She impatiently snapped her powerful jaws at Graypaw and Firepaw and nosed her way between them and her patient.

Firepaw realized she was serious, despite the lively glimmer in her warm amber eyes.

"Come on then, Firepaw," mewed Graypaw. "I'll show you around. See you later, Ravenpaw."

The two short-wings left Spottedleaf with Ravenpaw and walked across the clearing.

Graypaw looked thoughtful. He was clearly taking his duties as a guide very seriously. "You know the Highrock already," he bagan, flicking his long spike covered tail towards the big cliff that jutted out away from the mountain. "Bluestar always addressed the Clan from there. Her den is hidden beyond it, there's an entrance near the ground though too." Hanging Licken reached down and touched ferns that covered a cavernous entrance hiding it at quick glance.

"The warriors sleep over here," Graypaw went on.

Firepaw followed him to a shorter ledge a few wing flaps away from the Highrock. There was a clear view from the ledge to the entrance tunnel into camp. The entrance was long and short but Firepaw could see that the cave opened up inside and a warm heat glowed from within.

"The senior warriors sleep on the upper ledges away from others, it's also the warmest," explained Graypaw. "They usually share their fresh-kill together on that lookout ledge up there. The younger warriors eat out here. Sometimes they are invited to join the senior warriors for eating, which is a big honor."

"What about the other Clan members?" Firepaw asked, fascinated but feeling rather overwhelmed by all the traditions and rituals of

Clan life.

"We'll the queens share warrior quarters when they work as warriors, but when they are hatching eggs or nursing Short tooths, they stay in a nest in the nursery. The elders have their own place on the other side of the clearing. Come on, I'll show you."

Firepaw trotted after Graypaw, across the clearing and past the shadowy nook where Spottedleaf had her den. They stopped beside several large logs leaning against a small ledge creating a nice shaded spot for some elders to lay on soft grass. Two elder's sat outside in the sun and two laid in the shade, both groups sharing some yak.

"Dustpaw and Sandpaw would have brought them that," whispered Graypaw. "One of the apprentices' duties is catching fresh-kill for the elders."

"Hello, youngster," the orange and blue rumblehorn from earlier greeted them.

"Hello, Smallhorn." chirped Graypaw, bowing respectfully.

"This must be our new apprentice. Firepaw, isn't it?" grunted another voice. Firepaw looked around before spotting the tiny dark purple terrible terror laying in the sun, the long grass nearly as tall as him. His tail was cut off at the base leaving a small stub.

"That's right," Firepaw replied, copying Graypaw's polite bow.

"I'm Halftail," purred the small dragon. "Welcome to the Clan."

"Have you two eaten?" grunted Smallhorn.

Firepaw and Graypaw both shook their heads.

"Well, there's enough here. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are turning into fine hunters. Would you mind if these youngsters shared a cod, Oneeye?"

The other elder dragon hidden in the shade shook her large head. Firepaw noticed one of her eyes was clouded and sightless.

"What about you, Dappletail?"

The other elder dragon who laid beside Oneeye lifted her head, then another, and another until she had four heads all looking at them. One head opened its mouth and replied in a hushed tone, "Of course not." A sickly sweet smell floated on the air from her breath.

"Thank you," Mewed Graypaw eagerly. He stepped forward and took a large cod from the pile of prey, then dropped it at Firepaw's feet. "You want the first bite? He asked.

"Sure." Firepaw said happily and opened his mouth leaning down to take the large fish.

"Hey! I could have sworn-" Graypaw started to say as Firepaw extended his teeth and bit into the fish. "-you had teeth."

Firepaw chewed his part and swallowed, "I do. They just are retractable. See?" He turned to graypaw and retracted his teeth and gave a slight smile.

"I have never seen that before!" Graypaw squawked.

A large shadow cast over the two short-wings, "What kind of dragon are you." hissed a low scratchy voice.

"P-patchpelt!" Graypaw leapt into the air startled by the monstrous nightmare that had slithered up behind them.

"Don't you know it's rude to ask a dragon that." Scolded Oneeye as she rose to her two legs shielding Firepaw with a gentle wing.

The large colorful dragon stared intently at Firepaw before turning away and slinking into the elders den.

Graypaw let out a small breath of relief, "Patchpelt can be a bit moody." With a small shrug Graypaw quickly leaned down to eat some of the cod.

Firepaw felt his spines twitch as if he was still being watched until Smallhorn drew his attention away.

"Howlong before Bluestar appoints a new deputy?"

"What did you say, Smallhorn?" snorted Oneeye as she curled back up in the shade.

"I think your hearing has become as poor as your eyesight!" snapped Smallhorn impatiently. "I said, how long before Bluestar appoints a new deputy?"

Oneeye ignored Smallear's irritated reply and spoke instead to the Snap-Trapper queen. "Dappletail, do you remember the day many seasons ago when Bluestar herself was appointed deputy?"

Dappletail lifted one head and replied earnestly, "Oh, yes!" a second head spoke, "It was not long after she lost her eggs."

"She'll not be happy to be appointing a new deputy," Smallhorn observed. "Redtail served her long and well. But she'll need to make up her mind quickly. According to Clan custom, the choice has to be made before moon high after the death of the old deputy.

"At least this time this time the choice is obvious," groaned Halftail.

Firepaw lifted a major caedyt curiously and looked around the clearing. Who could Halftail mean? To Firepaw, all the warriors looked worthy of becoming deputy. Perhaps he meant Tigerclaw; after all, he had avenged Redtail's death. Tigerclaw was sitting not far off. His three tails braided into one, poised over his head ready to strike.

As Firepaw stretched his long wings after sitting listening to the elders, Bluestar's voice called from the Highrock. Redtail's body still lay in the clearing below, his scales graying in the fading light. "A new deputy must be appointed," she roared. "But first, let us give thanks to Starclan for the life of Redtail. Tonight he sits with his fellow warriors and ancients among the stars."

Silence fell as all the dragons looked up into the sky, which was beginning to darken as evening crept over the forest.

"And now I shall name Thunderclan's new deputy," Bluestar continued. "I say these words before the body of Redtail, so that his

spirit may hear and approve my choice."

Firepaw looked at Tigerclaw. He couldn't help noticing the hunger in the big warrior's amber eyes as he stared up at the Highrock.

"Lionheart," huffed Bluestar, "will be the new deputy of Thunderclan."

Firepaw was curious to see Tigerclaw's reaction. But the dark warrior's face revealed nothing as he moved to congratulate Lionheart with a nudge so hearty that it almost pushed the golden dragon off balance.

"Why didn't she make Tigerclaw deputy?" Firepaw whispered to Graypaw.

"Probably because Lionheart has been a warrior longer, so he has a lot more experience," Graypaw murmured back, still looking up at Bluestar.

Bluestar spoke again. "Redtail was also a mentor to young Dustpaw. Since there must be no delay in the training of our apprentices, I shall appoint Dustpaw's new mentor immediately. Darkstripe, you are ready for your first apprentice, so you will continue Dustpaws training. You had a fine mentor in Tigerclaw, and I expect you to pass on some of the excellent skills you were taught."

The patched broad dragon swelled with pride as he showed his acceptance with a solemn nod of his large crowned head. He strode over to Dustpaw, raised his wings, and opened his jaw slightly oozing with flames. Dustpaw opened his own dark brown jaw. A gurgling hissing sound emitted before he shot a large ball of acid to the sky, Darkstripe's own flame shot and the two combined in a small burst. Dustpaw waved his tendrils respectfully, but his eyes were still dull with grief for his lost mentor.

Bluestar raised her voice. "I shall keep vigil with Redtail's body tonight, before we bring him to the ancient one at sunrise." She glided down from the Highrock and walked over to lie beside Redtail's body once more. Man of the other dragons joined her, Dustpaw and Small horn among them.

"Should we sit with them too?" Firepaw suggested. He had to admit the idea didn't appeal to him much. It had been a busy day and he was beginning to feel tired. All he wanted to do was find somewhere to curl up and sleep.

Graypaw shook his head. "No, only those who were closest to Redtail will share his final night. I'll show you where we sleep. The apprentices' den is over here."

Firepaw followed Graypaw to a cove filled with dragon nip grass off to the side was a large mossy boulder.

"All the apprentices share their fresh-kill by this stump," Graypaw told him.

"Not as many as usual-just me, you, Ravenpaw, Dustpaw and Sandpaw."

As Graypaw and Firepaw settled themselves beside the boulder, a young dragon crawled out from the smaller cave entrance on the other side of the grassy field. Her scales were pale ginger and her frame was small and looked similar to that of Firepaw. Except she had spikes along her head, back and wings. Her tail was smooth with two tail fins.

"So here comes the new apprentice!" she hissed, narrowing her eyes.

"Hello," Firepaw clicked.

The young dragon sniffed rudely. "He smells like a viking pet! Don't tell me I'm going to have to share my nest with that revolting stench!"

Firepaw was taken aback at her harsh tone, "It's alright- I could sleep outside in the tree if you'd like."

"You'll have to excuse Sandpaw," apologized Graypaw. "I think she must have a a sandball stuck somewhere. She's not usually this bad-tempered.

Fire licked at her lips as Sandpaw readied herself ready to fire.

"Hold on, youngsters" The deep voice of Whitestorm sounded behind the apprentices. "Sandpaw! As my apprentice, I expect you to be a little more welcoming to this newcomer."

Sandpaw held up her head and looked defiant. "I'm sorry, Whitestorm," she cooed, not sounding sorry at all. "I just didn't expect to be training with a biking born, that's all!"

"I'm sure you'll get used to it, Sandpaw," chuffed Whitestorm calmly. "Now, it's getting late, and training starts early tomorrow. You three should get some sleep." He gave Sandpaw a stern look, and she nodded obediently. As he walked off, she spun around and vanished into the cavern, sniffing once more as she brushed past Firepaw.

With a flick of his spiked tail, Graypaw invited Firepaw to follow him, and led the way after Sandpaw. Inside the sleeping area, the ground was hard and warm. Moss grew on the back walls, pale moonlight filtered in from a small crevice in the ceiling. The air was fragrant with a smoky scent, and much warmer than outside.

"Where do I sleep?" Firepaw asked.

"Anywhere, just so long as it's not near me!" Snarled Sandpaw, who was circling around in a sandy corner.

Graypaw and Firepaw exchanged glances, but said nothing. Firepaw leapt up to stalactite and hung upside down by his hind paws much like a bat. He wrapped his wings around him, his tail fin fanning out covering his face. His whole body felt drowsy with contentment. This was his home now. He was a member of Thunderclan

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"Hey, Firepaw, wake up!" Graypaw's squawk broke into Firepaw's dream. He had been chasing some dolphins, around many sea stacks.

"Training begins at sunrise. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are already up," Graypaw added urgently.

Firepaw dropped to the ground giving his wing a stretch, then remembered today was his first day of training. He opened his eyes wide and bounded out of the cave. His drowsiness evaporated as excitement surged through his veins.

Graypaw was giving himself a hasty wash. "I've just spoken to Lionheart. Ravenpaw won't be training with us till his wound is better. He'll probably stay at Spottedleaf's den for another day or two. Dustpaw and Sandpaw are on hunting duty. So Lionheart thought you and I could train with him and Tigerclaw this morning. We'd better hurry, though," he added. "They'll be waiting!"

Graypaw led Firepaw quickly through the entrance tunnel, taking a different turn and exiting on the forest side instead of the sea side where he had entered from the previous day. They took off, flew over a small valley and up the mountain side following the ravine. As they climbed higher the cool breeze tugged at Firepaw's wings pushing him higher as they raced fat white clouds overhead. Firepaw felt fierce joy well up inside him as he followed Graypaw down the other side of the mountain pass into a tree speckled slope and down to a wide sandy beach.

Tigerclaw and Lionheart were indeed waiting, sitting a few wing-lengths apart on the sun-warmed sand.

"In the future, I expect you both to be punctual," growled Tigerclaw.

"Don't be too severe, Tigerclaw; it was a busy night last night. I expect they were tired," grunted Lionheart gently. "You have not yet

been assigned a mentor, Firepaw," he went on. "For now, Tigerclaw and I will share your training."

Firepaw nodded enthusiastically, his tail held high, unable to disguise his delight at having two such great warriors as his mentors.

"Come," barked Tigerclaw impatiently. "Today we are going to show you the edges of our territory, so that you know where you will be hunting and what boundaries you need to protect. Graypaw, it won't do you any harm to remind yourself of the Clan's outer limits."

Without another word, Tigerclaw leaped to the air and flew out over the sea. Lionheart nodded to Graypaw and they took off with equal speed. Firepaw scrambled after them, his body wobbly in the air as he took off on unsteady wings. The sky was clear as the sun shone brightly overhead. They flew past the reef and out over the deep sea that sparkled like a sapphire. They flew around the edge of the island and above the tall sea stacks back towards the dense fog. Tigerclaw landed on a jagged cropping of sea stacks.

"There's a viking ship route here," murmured Lionheart as he landed beside Firepaw. "Use your senses, Firepaw. Can you smell, see, hear anything?"

Firepaw scanned the open passage, perking his caedyts, and sniffed the air. He could smell a strange smell, mixed with the smell of sheep. "A viking trade ship sailed through here earlier, my guess is they were carrying sheep."

"Good," chuffed Lionheart. "Do you think it is safe to cross?"

Firepaw looked both ways again. Straining to hear anything, but the whistling of the winds through the channel of sea stacks was the only thing he could hear. "Yes," he replied. Tigerclaw nodded, and the four dragons flew down from their sea stack and into the channel opening and followed it until the fog grew thick again and they veered right into the dense fog. As they broke through many ships lay strewn across the jagged rocks and shallow waters. It was open no tall sea stacks, old cages and broken masts littered the

clearing. Firepaw sensed tension in the other dragons as they flew above the open area surrounded by many ships used to take down their kind.

"The hunters have crashed several ships in this sunken island," clicked Tigerclaw. "They still return to this place as if they are searching for something and eels have inhabited this area, they are big enough to swallow a short-wing whole. Even drag a broad-wing under."

Firepaw looked at the dark water wondering if he could see the giant eels Tigerclaw mentioned.

"The eels dive deep during the cold seasons, they won't come out for a few more moons, until the time of green leaf," explained Graypaw, noticing his pause.

The dragons flew on, their wings silently flapping in the air.

"The viking island lies in that direction," clicked Tigerclaw pointing one of his pincer arms to one side. "No doubt you can smell it, Firepaw. Today, however, we will head the other way."

Eventually they reached another fog bank which marked the far edge of the sunken island. They quickly cross though into the safety of cover. But Firepaw still sensed anxiety in the other dragons.

"We're approaching Riverclan territory," whispered Graypaw. "Sunning rock island is over there." He pointing with his horned nose to a small island of mostly beach and rock.

Firepaw felt his fins prick. This was where Redtail had been slain. Firepaw could see the many claw marks and burns on the flat rock as they landed. Blood and scales littered the ground still.

Lionheart glanced around at the damage before speaking, "This is the boundary between Thunderclan and Riverclan territory. Riverclan rules the hunting grounds beside the great current," he snorted. "Breathe deeply, Firepaw."

Firepaw scrunched up his nose in disgust as the pungent smell of unfamiliar dragons hit the roof of his mouth. He was shocked how

different it smelled from the warm scent of Thunderclan camp. And he was also surprised to realize just how familiar and comforting the Thunderclan scents seemed to him already.

"That is the smell of Riverclan, and tidal dragons." Tigerclaw growled beside him. "Remember it well. It will be strongest at the boundary, because their warriors will have scent-marked around this island." With these words, the dark triple stryke blasted his own fire on the edge of the island. Marking their territory.

"We'll follow this boundary line, as it leads straight to Four Trees," Lionheart rumbled.

They set off quickly, away from Sunning Rock Island, followed by Tigerclaw. Graypaw and Firepaw flew after them.

"What's special about Four Trees?" Firepaw panted, his wings growing tired.

"It is where the territories of all four Clans meet the ancient." replied Graypaw. "There are four great oaks there, as old as the alpha-"

"Be quiet!" ordered Tigerclaw. "Don't forget how close we are to enemy territory!"

The two apprentices fell silent and Firepaw concentrated on steady wing flaps. It wasn't long before Firepaw began to hear a clicking buzz. His caedyts swiveled and shivered, attacked by this new sound. His vision grew blurry as his pupils narrowed.

Graypaw steadied Firepaw's wings by placing one of his long wings under his. Firepaw could tell the others heard it too but they seemed now more focused on the sound following it as fog grew around them. Once Firepaw regained his balance Graypaw moved away. The buzzing called to him, beckoning him in closer and closer.

Before he knew it the four had landed on a large island covered in thick trees. The clicking nearly deafening. Firepaw's wings ached and he was out of breath. He wasn't used to traveling so far and so

fast. He was quite relieved when Lionheart and Tigerclaw let them by foot into the woods and into another tunnel.

The further they walked the louder the call became until Firepaw couldn't hear it anymore or anything for that matter. They came out of the tunnel at the top of a cliff overlooking a deep green canyon. The bottom was covered in what looked like long grass and trees. Firepaw could see three other ledges and tunnel entrances. Just beyond them were four giant oaks that went to the bottom of the canyon. Their roots seemed to cover the canyon floor with a small forest. One rock stack stood alone between them and the four oaks.

"As Graypaw told you," grunted Lionheart to Firepaw, "this is Four Trees, where the territories of all four Clans meet, and where our alpha lives. Windclan has the most sharp class dragons, they are known for their speed on ground and in the air. Shadowclan are dark dragons, they are mostly boulder class dragons, they may not be fast but they can have thick hide and are strong opponents."

Firepaw thought back to his viking island and his friends Smudge and Rukker, they would have made good Shadowclan warriors, he thought to himself.

"The elders say that the cold winds from the north blow over the Shadowclan dragons and chill their hearts." Graypaw chirped.

"So many Clans!" Firepaw exclaimed.

"You see now why territory is so precious," chuffed Lionheart. "Why we must fight to protect what little prey and safety we have."

"But that seems foolish! Why can't the Clans work together and share their hunting grounds, instead of fighting each other?" Firepaw suggested boldly.

A shocked silence greeted his words.

Tigerclaw was the first to reply. "That is treacherous thinking, viking pet." he snapped.

"Don't be too fierce, Tigerclaw," warned Lionheart. "The way of the Clans are new to this apprentice. "He looked at Firepaw. "You speak

from your heart, young Firepaw. This will make you a stronger warrior one day."

Tigerclaw growled. "Or it might make it him give into the Viking born weakness right at the first moment of attack."

Lionheart glanced briefly at Tigerclaw before he continued. "The four Clans do come together peacefully, in a gathering each moon. Here" - he bent his head towards the four oaks which shuttered as the ground beneath them shook.-"Is where they meet. The truce lasts for as long as the moon is at its fullest, and the ancient allows it."

Firepaw realized that the mass of roots did not belong to the four oaks but to a gigantic sleeping dragon. "Then there must be a meeting very soon?" Firepaw suggested, remembering how bright the moonlight had been the night before. He wondered if the large beast was going to wake with them here.

"Indeed there is!" answered Lionheart, sounding impressed. "Tonight, in fact. The gatherings are very important because they allow the clans to come together in peace for one night. But you must understand that longer alliances bring more trouble than they're worth."

"It is our clan loyalty that makes us strong," Tigerclaw clicked in agreement. "If you weaken that loyalty, you weaken our chances of survival."

Firepaw nodded. "I understand," he chirped.

"Come one," huffed Lionheart, standing up. "Let's keep moving."

They retreated back into the tunnel and left the island heading away from the sun as it began to sink in the afternoon sky. They flew over quite a few sea stacks and an occasional shipwreck that Firepaw could make out through the fog.

Firepaw sniffed the air. A new scent touched his mouth glands, strong and metallic as the fog lifted. "Which Clan is that?" he asked.

"Shadowclan." answered Tigerclaw grimly. "We are traveling along

their border. Keep your wits about you, Firepaw. Fresher scents mean that a Shadowclan patrol is in the area."

As Firepaw nodded, he heard a new noise. He tensed, but the other dragons kept their pace, heading straight for odd shouting and voices.

"What's that?" he called, as they began to climb higher.

"You'll see in a moment," replied Lionheart.

Firepaw peered through the clouds and fog. It seemed to be getting thinner, letting in a broad band of sunlight. "Are we at the edge of the fog bank?" he asked. Then he glided for a moment and took a deep breath. The sea scent was overlaid with other strange, musty smells. This time it was not dragon-scent, but an odor that reminded him of the night he saw the mysterious viking on his island. The voices were getting louder, the scent made Firepaw sneeze.

""This is the hunters trade route." hissed Tigerclaw as they landed on a tall sea stack.

Firepaw followed as Lionheart led them toward the edge of the sea stack. Firepaw crawled forward and peered over the ledge. He could see the churning water from the passing ships. They held many Vikings each armed with weapons, in lead was a giant ship with several green metal cages. Firepaw gagged at the scent coming from the cages.

Next moment he leaped back, his wings tall, as a large spear whistled past. It fell and scraped on the stone and as if it was alive started to rattle and slowly slide back. Firepaw watched as a small rope pulled it back towards the ship. "Bitter root poison, that's what you smell." Lionheart growled, "It's a nasty thing, It can take down a dragon with one hit. They use it to bring dragons to them."

"You have to be careful to not be seen by the hunters or trappers. Some take us alive, others only want our pelt." Graypaw hissed, his spikes stood on end. "You'll be okay as long as you don't get too close."

"It's time we returned to camp," chuffed Lionheart. "You have seen all out boundaries now. But we'll avoid Snake rocks, even though the way around is longer. An untrained apprentice would be easy prey for slither wings, and I expect you are getting tired, Firepaw."

Firepaw couldn't help feeling relieved at the thought of returning to the camp. His head was spinning with all the new smells and sights, and Lionheart was right; he was tired, and hungry. He followed as they took off back towards their island.

The dewy scents of evening filled the air as Firepaw made his way through the camps entrance tunnels into the Thunderclan camp. Fresh-kill was waiting for them. Firepaw and Graypaw took their share from the pile that lay in a shady part of the clearing and carried it to the tree stump outside their quarters.

Dustpaw and Sandpaw were already there, munching hungrily.

"Hi, there, Viking pet," growled Dustpaw, narrowing his eyes scornfully at Firepaw. "Enjoy the food *we* caught for you."

"Who knows, you might even learn to catch your own one day!" sneered Sandpaw.

"Are you two still on hunting duty?" asked Graypaw innocently. "Never mind. We've been patrolling our territory borders. You'll be glad to know all is safe."

"I'm sure the other Clans were terrified when they smelled you two coming!" roared Dustpaw.

"They didn't even star show their faces," retorted Graypaw, unable to hide his anger as hot lava bubbled in his jaw.

"Well, we'll ask them tonight when we see them at the Clan Gathering," chuffed Sandpaw.

"Are you going?" Firepaw blurted out, impressed in spite of the apprentices' hostility.

"Of course," replied Dustpaw loftily. "It's a great honor, you know. But don't worry; we'll tell you all about it in the morning."

Graypaw ignored Dustpaw's gloating and started eating his fish. Firepaw was hungry too, and crouched down to eat. He couldn't help feeling a twinge of envy that Dustpaw and Sandpaw were actually going to meet the other Clans tonight.

A loud call from Bluestar made Firepaw look up. He watched several of the clan warriors and elders gather in the clearing. It was time for the Clan party to leave for the Gathering. Dustpaw and Sandpaw leaded to the air and flew over to the other dragons.

"Bye, you two," called Sandpaw over her wing. "Have a nice, quiet evening!"

The assembled dragons flew out of the camp clearing in one big mass like a cloud of dragons, with Bluestar at the head. Her fur-like scales glowed like silver in the moonlight, and she looked calm and confident as she led her clan to the brief truce between old enemies.

"Have you ever been to a gathering?" Firepaw asked Graypaw wistfully.

"Not yet," replied Graypaw, crunching loudly on some salmon. "But it won't be long now, just you wait. All the apprentices get to go sometime."

The two apprentices ate the rest of their meal in silence. When they had finished, Graypaw wandered over to Firepaw and started to preen his scales. Together they chatted, sharing flames as Firepaw had seen the other dragons do when he first arrived. Then, tired after the long trek, they made their way into their den. They settled down into nests and quickly fell asleep.

Into the Wild Ch. 5.2

The following morning, Graypaw and Firepaw arrived early at the sandy cove. They had crept out before Sandpaw and Dustpaw woke. Firepaw had been eager to hear about the Gathering, but Graypaw had dragged him away. “You’ll’ hear all about it later, if I know those two,” he had mewed.

It promised to be another warm day. And this time Ravenpaw came to join them. Thanks to Spottedleaf, his wound was healing well. Graypaw played around, knocking rocks into the air and throwing spikes through them. Firepaw watched, his tail twitching with amusement. Ravenpaw sat quietly at one side of the hollow, looking tense and unhappy.

“Cheer up, Ravenpaw!” called Graypaw. “I know you don’t like training, but you’re not usually this miserable!”

The scents of Lionheart and Tigerclaw warned the apprentices of their approach, and Ravanpaw rasped hastily, “I suppose I’m just worried about my wing getting hurt again.” His black pelt wavered blending slightly with his surroundings.

At that moment, Tigerclaw landed into the clearing, Closely followed by Lionheart.

“Warriors should suffer their pain silently,” growled Tigerclaw, his three long tails twirling together. He looked Ravenpaw straight in the eye. “You need to learn to hold your tongue.”

Ravenpaw flinched and dropped his head to the ground.

“Tigerclaw’s a bit grumpy today,” Graypaw whispered to Firepaw.

Lionheart glanced at his apprentice sternly and announced, “Today we are going to practice different stalking methods. Now, there is a big difference between walking and flying and they are both useful in different terrains. Can any of you tell me which would be best for

this area?"

Firepaw had no idea, and Ravenpaw seemed to have taken Tigerclaw's comment to heart and was holding his tongue.

"Come on!" snorted Tigerclaw impatiently as he snapped his large claws.

It was Graypaw who answered: "The cove has little cover, flying would be best. Either using the sea stacks as lookouts, or blending into the cliff side if there isn't much cloud cover like today.

"Exactly, Graypaw!" So what must you bear in mind when stalking prey by sky?"

"Watch your shadow?" Firepaw suggested.

Lionheart looked approvingly at him. "Quite right, Firepaw. You must always be aware of the sun's position and the shadow you cast. A shadow can give away your position. The key is to attack before your shadow gives you away. Let's try it!" Lionheart walked a few paces before nudging the sand with his nose and revealed a large piece of driftwood that looked like it belonged to a wrecked ship. "This will be your target."

Firepaw watched at Graypaw lifted off, followed by Ravenpaw. He spread his own wings and took to the sky, a few wing flaps before they stopped and hovered. Graypaw did a small loop and dove, his wings spread out as he glided down towards the target. Graypaw pulled back and whipped his tail under him three spikes flew, two hit the target the third missed. He pulled up and circled back to Firepaw and Ravenpaw.

"Nicely done, Graypaw!" chuffed Lionheart as he looked up at them.

Ravenpaw swallowed before he dived himself.
"Watch your wings, Ravenpaw you look like a duck landing!"spat Tigerclaw. Ravenclaw tilted his wings down and lobbed a ball of acid at the target. It splattered on the ground barely touching the wood. The acid began to eat away at the wood with a hiss. "Now

you try it, Firepaw."

Firepaw nodded and began to dive. He felt his body instinctively fall into the right position as the wind around him whistled. His wings tight to his body as the ground rose to meet his falling body quickly. Opening his mouth he readied a shot. He aimed and fired. He watched the purple plasma blast obliterate the wood and sand. Creating a big cloud. Flailing his wings he tried to pull up but he was too close to the ground. His front feet hit the sand he lurched forward tumbling a few feet before coming to a stop.

"Well, it's obvious you've known nothing but softness!" growled Tigerclaw. "You dive like a small viking child falling from a tree! Do you think dinner is going to come and lie down in your food bucket and wait to be eaten?"

Firepaw sat up quickly as Tigerclaw spoke, a little taken aback by his harsh words. He listened carefully to the warrior, determined to get everything right.

"His landing and timing will come later, but his dive and shot are perfectly formed," Lionheart pointed out mildly.

"Which is better than Ravenpaw, I suppose," complained Tigerclaw. He cast a scornful look at the black dragon. "Even after two moons of training, you're still putting all the strain on your left wing."

Ravenpaw looked even more dejected, and Firepaw couldn't stop himself from blurting out, "His injury is bothering him, that's all! He even hit the target!"

Tigerclaw whipped his large head around and glared at Firepaw. "Injuries are a fact of life. He should be able to adapt. Even you, Firepaw, have learned something this morning. If Ravenpaw picked up things as quickly as you, he'd be a credit to me instead of an embarrassment. Imagine being shown up by a kittypet!" he spat angrily at his apprentice.

Firepaw felt his spines prickle with discomfort. He couldn't meet Ravenpaw's eyes, so he looked down at his own black paws.

“Well, *I’m* more lopsided than a one-winged slitherwing,” mewed Graypaw breaking off from his careful crouch to stagger comically across the sandy beach, his wings flailing wildly. “I think I’ll have to settle for hunting stupid sheep. They won’t stand a chance. I shall just wander up to them and sit on them till they surrender.”

“Concentrate, young Graypaw. This is no time for your shenanigans! Barked Lionheart sternly. “Perhaps you might focus your mind better if you try diving for real.”

All three apprentices looked up brightly.

The three apprentices took to the air, even Ravenpaw finding some extra energy for this challenge.

With the blood pounding in his head, Firepaw soared out towards the sand bar. He saw a flock of birds sitting on the exposed wet sand as the tide had gone out. With the high tide it would have a few feet of water and would be a great place to search for crabs, and other shallow water fish. He watched for any flashing movement beneath the water, his mouth open so he could pick up the smallest scent, his caydites twisted forward, listening intently.

He flew over a small islet. Every sense felt on fire with tension. Silently he scanned the empty islet for signs of life.

Nothing.

Then he heard a soft splash. He recognized the sound of fish, he glanced down and saw the familiar flash of silver scales swarming just beneath the surface of the water. Swimming through the channel between the islet and sunning rock island. Wild energy surged through him, but he remained floating on the stream of air, trying to remember his training.

Firepaw gracefully dove down, bringing his wings close to his sleek body. He narrowed his eyes against the wind, getting ready to dive. He readied a plasma blast. Holding it until the salty air burned his nostrils. He fired and dove beneath the water. Blindly he snapped his jaws grabbing several large fish. Slowly he swam to the surface breaching the water and landing on the edge of the islet. He

dropped his prey. He had several fish. A few of them flopped limply on the rock.

He picked up all of his catch carefully with his mouth. Then kicked strongly with his hind legs and a powerful flap of his wings to return to the training beach where Tigerclaw and Lionheart waited. He had made his first catch. He was a true Thunderclan apprentice now.

Into The Wild Ch. 6

Early-morning sunlight lit the mist that rose from the sea, as Firepaw roamed over the ocean. Six moons had passed since he had begun his training. He felt at ease in this environment now. His senses had been awoken and educated in the ways of a true dragon.

Firepaw landed on a lone sea stack, taking a moment to watch the small feathered creatures dive into the sea and come up with a single fish in their sharp beak. He caught the scent of a Viking ship that had sailed by recently. The season was warm, and it rained a lot more. More and more fish came up from the depths, Ice no longer floated in the sea.

Firepaw leapt from his sea stack, his wings were wide and thin, they cut through the air silently. All his senses alert for the smallest sound, that would result in a good hunt. Today he had been sent his first solo task. He was determined to do well, even if his task was only to bring back fresh-kill for the Clan.

He headed for a small reef near Owl island. The island wasn't very large, but it held many wildlife and a particularly giant gnarled tree. There a bunch of Long-eared owls held roosts during Leaf Bare. Firepaw liked the Owls. They had tufts of feathers that looked like his own caedytes. Now that it was New Leaf, they would be leaving the island.

Firepaw landed on the shore of the small island. He opened his jaw, testing the air for any scent prey or other dragons. The stench of a viking ship lay heavy in the air. The smell was stale, so the ship must have landed for the night. There was ashes in the sand from an old fire. Firepaw recognized the odor; he had smelled it on his first visit to the forest. Since then, Lionheart had taught him that it belonged to a nasty group of vikings, dragon hunters. Apart from the small glimpse of the two strange vikings in the forest he had seen on that first outing, Firepaw had still never seen a full ship.

He struggled to screen out the hunter-stench and concentrate on prey-scent. Suddenly his caedytes prickled as he homed in on the soft snuffling of a boar.

Firepaw crept silently along the forest floor, a moment later he saw the boar snooting about in a small clearing near a large tree. Firepaw's mouth watered in anticipation, his last meal had been many hours ago, but he dared not hunt for himself until the clan had been fed. He remembered the words repeated by Lionheart, and Tigerclaw time and time again; "The Clan MUST be fed first."

Dropping into a crouch, Firepaw began to stalk the tusked creature. His black scales blended perfectly into the shadows of the brush. He crept closer, his orange eyes never leaving his prey. Almost there. Six wing lengths away, five, four... Another moment and he would be close enough to spring.

Suddenly the sound of branched snapping sounded off behind Firepaw. The wild boar lifted it's head and bolted off in fear.

Firepaw felt his teeth drop, as his spine scales pricked. Whatever had ruined his first good chance of catching food for his clan would have to pay.

He sniffed the air. He could tell it was a dragon, but he realized with a jolt that he couldn't identify which Clan it belonged to - the stale sentch of hunter's still confused his smell-since.

A growl rose in his throat as his eyes narrowed. He swept his broad head, scanning the clearing, seeking out any movement. He heard bushes rustle, more branches snapped. It was louder now, off to his left. Firepaw leapt to the air to try and see the approaching enemy through the trees, but the thick forest hid them from view.

Firepaw parted his jaw, hot plasma began to build in his throat as he prepared a blast. The invisible warrior was coming closer. Firepaw steadied his wings, and got ready to strike. The moment brush moved to the sides and a large greyish figure emerged.

Firepaw shot a plasma blast, then dove at the creature. "Gr-aaar!" The battle cry rumbled in Firepaw's throat. Claws collided with

scales, as Firepaw landed on the enemy. Landing squarely on the back between two Speckled grey wings. He dug in hard, gripping with large dagger sharp claws, ready to deal out a powerful bite.

"Wa-AH! Whatsat?" The body below him leapt to the air, carrying him with it.

"Uh! Greypaw?!" Firepaw recognized the astonished voice and caught his friend's familiar smell, but he was too fired up to loosen his grip.

"Ambush! Squa-arh!" Screeched Greypaw, not realizing that the dragon gripping onto his back was Firepaw. His spiked tail lashed attempting to dislodge his attacker.

"Uuff-ff!" Firepaw paw knocked roughly off Greypaw's back hitting the ground hard. "It's me-Firepaw!" He howled as he flipped to his feet and gave himself a shake, which rippled all the way along his body to the tip of his tail. "Greypaw! It's Me," he repeated. "I thought you were an enemy warrior!"

Greypaw landed and soothed his scales. "It felt like it!" he grumbled, twisting his head to preen some loose spikes. "You've blasted me to pieces!"

"Sorry," Firepaw mumbled. "But what was I supposed to think, with you creeping up on me like that?"

"Creeping up!" Greypaw's eyes were round with indignation. "That was my best stealth crouch."

"Stealth! You stalk like a one winged buffalord!" Firepaw teased. He flapped his wings playfully.

Greypaw gave a squawk of delight. "I'll show you lopsided!"

The two dragons leapt at each other and began rolling over and over in a play-fight. Graypaw snapped at Firepaw with a strong jaw, and the young apprentice's head buzzed with stars.

"Uuff-ff!" Firepaw shook his head to clear it then launched a counterattack.

He managed to get in a couple of paw strikes before Graypaw overpowered him and held him down. Firepaw let his body go limp.

"You give up too easily!" Mocked Greypaw, loosening his grip. aS he did so, Firepaw sprang to his feet, striking him with two plasma blasts in a row. Knocking Greypaw off into the undergrowth.

Firepaw leapt after him and pinned him to the ground. "Surprise is the warrior's greatest weapon," he crowed, quoting Lionheart's favorite phrases. HE jumped nimbly off Graypaw and began to roll around in the leaf litter and ferns, enjoying his easy victory and the warmth of the earth against his back.

Greypaw seemed un-bothered by his second defeat of the morning. It was too fine a day for bad temper. "So how're you getting on with your task?" He asked.

Firepaw sat up. "I was doing just fine till you came along! I was about to catch a boar when your noisy trembling frightened it off.

"Oh, sorry," muttered Greypaw.

Firepaw looked at his crestfallen friend. "That's okay. You didn't know," he purred. "Anyway," he continued, "shouldn't you be heading to meet the patrol on the Windclan border? I thought you had to give them a message from Bluestar."

"Yeah, but there's plenty of time. I was going to do a little hunting first. I'm starving!"

"Me too, but I've got to hunt for the Clan before I can hunt for myself."

"I bet Dustpaw and Sandpaw used to swallow a fish or two when they were on hunting duty," snorted Graypaw.

"I wouldn't be surprised if they did, but this is my first solo assignment..."

"And you want to do it right, I know." Graypaw sighed.

"What is the message from Bluestar, anyway?" Firepaw asked,

changing the subject.

"She wants the patrol to wait at the Great Sycamore until she joins them as sunhigh. Seems that some Shadowclan warriors have been prowling around. Bluestar wants to check things out."

"You'd best get going then," Firepaw reminded him.

"The Windclan hunting grounds aren't too far from here. There's plenty of time," answered Graypaw confidently. " And I suppose I should help out after losing you that boar."

"It doesn't matter," Firepaw reassured, "I'll find another. It's such a warm day, there should be quite a few out and about.

"True. But you still have to catch them." Greypaw nibbled at his right wing, pulling off a few spiked scales thoughtfully. "You know, that could take you until way past sunhigh, maybe even until sunset."

Firepaw nodded without enthusiasm as his belly gave a rumble. He would probably have to make three or four hunting trips before he had caught enough prey. Silverpelt would be in the sky before he got a chance to eat.

Greypaw twitched his crown. "Come on; I'll help you get started. I owe you that, at least. We should be able to catch a good amount of fish if we work together, before I have to get going."

Firepaw followed Graypaw back to the beach of the island, glad of the company and the help. The dragon hunter stench was still in the air, but suddenly it smelled stronger.

Firepaw paused. "Can you smell that?" he asked.

Greypaw stopped and sniffed the air too. "Hunters. Yeah, I smelled it earlier."

"Doesn't it smell fresher to you now, though?" Firepaw asked.

Greypaw lifted his head, sniffing again. "You're right," He murmured, lowering his voice. HE swiveled his head to look

through the trees and towards the beach beyond. "Look! He whispered.

Firepaw looked. He saw a group of them trampling through the woods. They stepped out on the beach, carrying large crates. They looked like the vikings from his old home, but wore different clothes. They all had vests made from various dragon hide, shiny green metal shoulder plates, and the helmets covered most of their faces. Strapped to their belts and backs were various swords and axes. Two held bows in their hands.

"So those are hunters." Firepaw whispered. "What's that smell?" He asked as a pungent scent began to waft over to them.

"Dragon root, it's nasty stuff." Graypaw hissed.

"Why do they have it?" Firepaw asked.

"They use it to take us down. One arrow can take out an apprentice." Greypaw took a step back, "Never trust dragon hunters. They enslave us, use us to battle, then kill us for our hides, when we are no longer useful. WE must warn the queens that a small party has entered our territory. The last thing we need is them getting into our nests. I'm just gald you didn't catch up to the one you saw last time. They'd have turned you into a cape!" Firepaw looked a little put out, and Graypaw added, "You'd stand a better chance these days, though. Anyway Bluestar will probably send a warrior patrol to sink their ship. Put the queens' minds at rest."

The hunters had not noticed them, so the two apprentices flew off in the opposite direction.

"So how does the dragon root work?" Firepaw asked as they landed on a couple of sea stacks.

"They use arrows, once it gets under your skin it's hard to fly, and you fall asleep. You also have to watch out for their traps. Get a wing or tail caught in one and your done for. How do you think Halftail got his name? He hasn't been able to fly since."

"Why not?"

"Dragons can't balance without their tails in the air. Can't get off the ground."

Firepaw nodded in understanding.

As Firepaw had predicted, hunting was good that day. Before long, Graypaw and him had gathered a rather large pile of fish, and Firepaw had caught two birds which Graypaw taught him were gulls. They dropped their prey in a small cave between two sea stacks while they hunted more. Suddenly a large fish had breached the water and swam off.

Firepaw saw it's figure distorted under the water and flew off after it. Greypaw flew after him, keeping close to his tail.

They both dove down into the cool salty water but the large fish dove faster than either of them. They came back up and shook the water from their scales.

"Lost it!" Cursed Graypaw in disappointment.

"What was that?" Firepaw asked.

"Most likely a dolphin, they are fast and smart."

Panting, the two dragons landed on a sea stack, to catch their breath. The strong smell of wet wood, and musty sails hit their noses, surprising them.

"The Trading route," Firepaw uttered. "I didn't realize we'd flown so far." The two dragons edged forward on their sea stack. It was the first time they had been there alone. A small rocky island stood in the middle of the deep waters. Two docks jetted out from the shore. A few large shacks stood with some trees. Next to one of the wooden shack was a large metal cage. It was green like the metal the hunters wore. A large mounted crossbow stood on a platform next to it. No boats were docked, it was empty.

"Come on lets go back," Greypaw whispered softly.

Firepaw twitched his tail, "Have you been to the island?"

Greypaw shook his head.

Firepaw leapt down, gliding towards the small island.

"Hey! What are you doing!"

Firepaw didn't reply he landed silently on the wooden dock. Old ropes hung off the edge dangling above the water. Sheep baaad softly from a pen near one of the shacks. Slowly Firepaw walked towards them. The strange cage had caught his attention. Greypaw landed next to him causing his to jump.

"Firepaw, come on this is dangerous, what if a viking comes, or worse what if hunters come? How do you know there isn't anyone here?" Greypaw fretted.

"There's no ships, and I didn't see any, their ships move slowly." Firepaw replied as he sniffed at the strange metal. Off on the other side of the island something caught his eye. More sea stacks loomed out of the water. Misty fog swirled around their bases. Firepaw could have sworn he saw some rocks move on the sea stack.

"They could be closer to Shadowclan territory in the mist."

"No, but I think there's a warrior over there."

"A shadowclan warrior?"

"No a riverclan warrior, yes a shadowclan warrior you smoke brain!"

"Come on," Greypaw hissed, "Let's get out of here, it's giving me the creeps."

Firepaw followed Greypaw into the air and back deeper into their territory.

"I'd better get a move on if I want to meet that patrol on time," Greypaw said, "See you later, you never know; Lionheart might let me come help you more with hunting once I've delivered this message." With that Greypaw tilted and flew off towards Sycamore island.

Firepaw watched him go. He envied Graypaw, wishing he were off to join a warrior patrol. But at least he'd have something to tell Dustpaw and Sandpaw when he returned to camp. Today he had seen his first Shadowclan warrior.

Into the Wild CH. 7

Firepaw retraced his flight and headed back towards Owl tree island. He thought of the burning eyes staring at him through the mist of Shadowclan territory.

He landed on the rock beach on the far side of owl island.

Suddenly he caught a faint smell on the breeze.

A stranger! Perhaps it was a shadowclan warrior...

Instantly a growl rumbled in Firepaw's throat. The scent message told him many things. The stranger was a boulder dragon, a female, a broadwing, and definitely not from Thunderclan. She carried no distinct scent from any of the Clans, but Firepaw could tell she was tired, hungry and sick and she was in an ugly mood.

Dropping low, Firepaw moved forward, heading towards the scent. Then he paused in puzzlement. The warrior scent was fainter now. He sniffed again.

Suddenly, the ground shook and the earth rumbled. A large spinning ball of spikes flew towards him from the bush behind him.

Firepaw screeched in shock as the large dragon slammed into him, knocking him sideways. Two heavy paws clamped down onto his shoulders, pinning his wings against his body. The rough grey skinned dragon opened his large jaw, the lower jaw splitting into two pieces revealing a mouth full of strong sharp teeth. It screeched and a large ball of fire began to pool between the three pieces of it's jaw. "Ahm, A puny apprentice. Easy prey for Yellowfang." She growled

At the insult, Firepaw felt a surge of fury. *Just wait* . He'd show this charred lizard what kind of warrior he was! Firepaw didn't recognize this type of dragon, but she was a lot bigger than he was,

there was no way he'd be able to throw her off of him. Quickly he shot his own plasma blast, exploding the ball of fire in her mouth.

She screeched and reared up, giving Firepaw enough time to slip out from under her grasp.

"Damn short-wing!" The she-dragon hissed, shaking her broadhead, bits of lava splattered from her mouth.

"I may be a short-wing but I am an apprentice of Thunderclan!" Firepaw announced triumphantly.

"Not bad, for such a young apprentice," She spat, "But you'll need to learn to do a lot better!"

Firepaw watched as she leapt into the air. He could now see her clearly. She was stocky with thick skin covered in rough bumps and many spikes. She had small wings compared to her body and short stout legs. Her tail was thick and short. He watched as she rose high into the air, and curled her tail under her.

"You're in Thunderclan's hunting grounds. Move on!" He challenged standing his ground.

"Who's going to make me?" Yellowfang called out defiantly. "I will eat, then I will leave. Or maybe I'll just stay awhile." Before he knew what was happening she had curled herself up into a ball and was falling back to the group. She was spinning fast, when she hit the group the earth shook jolting Firepaw.

His whole body vibrated, his head hurt and the world began to go fuzzy. He couldn't move. As the world began to refocus he could see her struggling to get to her own feet. Spikes had fallen off breaking brittally. She was malnourished, and her pelt sagged off of her.

Something stirred inside him, an unwarrior-like feeling he didn't want; pity. He tried not to dwell on this instinct - he knew his loyalty must be to his Clan - but he couldn't shake free of it. "You speak from your heart, young Firepaw." Lionheart's words echoed in his head once more. "This will make you a stronger warrior one day." Then Tigerclaw's warning rang in his ears; "Or it might make

him give in to kittypet weakness right at the moment of attack."

Yellowfang lunged forward and Firepaw jerked instantly back into aggression. The bigger dragon tried to bite at his wing joint, the two jaw pieces snapping loudly. The spikes on her chin scratched roughly into Firepaw's side. Firepaw dodge and took to the air.

Yellowfang leapt to the air after him, but landed shortly. He noticed her left wing had a large gash in it. The she dragon was badly wounded, and extremely malnourished.

"Had enough yet?" Firepaw growled. If the intruder gave way, he'd let her go with just a warning burn to remember him by.

"Never!" Yellowfang bellowed back bravely. With a flap of her large powerful wings she took to the skies again, but her wing gave way. She fell to the ground with a thunderous crash. Her legs shook as she rose, her eyes were dull as she hissed up at Firepaw, "If I weren't so hungry and tired, I'd have shredded you into scale dust." The boulder dragon's mouth twisted in pain and defiance. "Finish me off. I won't stop you."

Firepaw hesitated. HE'd never killed another dragon before. PErhaps, in the heat of battle, he would, but a mercy killing, in cold blood? This was something very different.

"What are you waiting for?" Yellowfang taunted, "You're dithering like a viking-hatched."

Firepaw smarted at her words. Could she smell the scent of vikings on him, even now, after all this time?

"I'm an apprentice warrior of Thunderclan!" He snapped.

Yellowfang narrowed her eyes. She'd seen Firepaw flinch at her words and she knew she'd hit a nerve. "Ha," She snorted. "Don't tell me Thunderclan is so desperate they have to recruit kitty pets now?"

"Thunderclan is not Desperate!" Firepaw hissed, firing off a plasma shot. Hitting her squarely in the belly

"Prove it then!" She gasped, "Act like a warrior and finish me off. You'll be doing me a favor."

Firepaw started at her. He would not be goaded into killing this miserable creature. He landed and relaxed his muscles as curiosity took him over. How had a clan dragon gotten into such a state? Thunderclan elders were looked after better than kits! "You seem in an awful hurry to die," He chirped.

"Yeah? Well, that's my business, fodder," Yelowfang snapped. "What's your problem, smokey? Are you trying to *talk* me to death?"

Her words were brave, but Firepaw could smell the hunger and sickness that were coming off the other dragon in waves. She was going to die anyway if she didn't eat soon. And since she could hardly hunt for herself, perhaps he should kill her now. The two dragons looked at each other, uncertainty in both their gazes.

"Wait here," Firepaw instructed at last.

Yellowfang seemed to deflate. Her spikes seemed to relax, and her tail lowered. She laid down in the sandy ground. "ARe you kidding, smokey? I'm going nowhere." She grunted, turning to lick at some bleeding wounds.

Firepaw glanced briefly over his shoulder at her and kissed quietly in exasperation before heading into the island.

He flew silently through the trees, sun warmed odors filled his nose, and he caught the sour reek of a long-dead sheep. He heard the scuffling of small island life in the brush. His first thought had been to go and collect his kill from earlier but that would take too long.

Maybe he should go and scoop up the sheep carcass. Easy meat, but a starving cat needed fresh-kill. Only when times were very hard would a warrior eat crow food.

Just then he paused, scenting a young yak. A few more flaps and he saw it. He landed in a tree, leaping from branch to branch he stalked the creature. He was barely two wing lengths away before it detected him. By then it was too late. The cream long fur galloping

away sent the thrill of the chase surging Firepaw's veins. A Rush of speed, a flash of teeth and claws. He had it. He held the wriggling body fast and finished it off quickly.

Yellowfang looked up tiredly as Firepaw dropped the young yak on the ground beside her. HEr grizzled jaw dropped. "Well, hello again, smokey! I thought you'd gone to fetch your little warrior friends."

"Yeah? Well, I might still do that. And don't call me smokey." Firepaw groulded, shoving the yak nearer with his nose. He felt embarrassed by his kindness. "Look, if you don't want this..."

"Ah-no," Yellowfang grunted hastily. "I do want it."

Firepaw watched her rip open the prey and start to swallow it down. His own hunger rose up and filled his mouth with water. He knew he shouldn't even be *thinking* about eating. He still had to take back enough prey for the Clan, but the fresh-kill smelled delicious.

"Mmm-mm" A few minutes later. Yellowfang flopped to her side with a loud belch. "Fire fresh-kill I've had for days." She licked her muzzle clean and settled down to give herself a thorough wash.

As if one wash is going to make much difference, Firepaw thought, his nose twitched. She was the arch-dragon of stench.

He eyes the tattered carcass that remained of the yak. There wasn't much left to line a growing dragon's belly, but his fight with Yellowfang had sharpened his appetite even more; he gave in to his hunger and gulped down the scraps. It was delicious. He licked his lips, savoring every last taste, tingling from head to tail.

Yellowfang watched him closely, showing her stained teeth. "Better than the chum the two-legs feed some of our brothers, isn't it? She asked slyly. Knowing she had found his sore spot, she was trying to antagonize him.

Firepaw ignored her and began to wash.

"It's poison," Yellowfang went on. "Worse than eel guts! Only a spineless bag of scales would accept such disgusting molding talus-" She broke off and tense. "Shh...warriors coming."

Firepaw was also aware of cats approaching. He could hear their soft wing flaps in the air, and the sound of branches swaying from their tail winds. He smelled the familiar scent of Thunderclan warriors. Confident enough in their own territory not to care about the noise they made. Firepaw licked his lips guiltily, hoping to wash away any traces of the scraps he'd just swallowed.

Then he looked at yellowfang and the fresh pile of yak bones that lay beside her. "The clan must be fed first!" Lionheart's voice rang through his head once more. But surely he would understand why Firepaw had fed this wretched creature. His mind reeled, suddenly fearful of what would happen to him. His first apprentice task, and he ended up breaking the warrior code!

Into the Wild - Ch. 8

Yellowfang growled in defiance at the approaching wing flaps, but Firepaw could sense her panic. The she dragon struggled to her feet, extending her broad wings. "So long, Thanks for the meal." She tried to take to the sky, but her injured wing strained under the pressure and she fell back to the ground with a heavy thud. "Blasted wing, stiffened up while I've been resting."

Now it was too late for her to run. Silent shadows dove in around them, and in a heartbeat the Thunderclan patrol had encircled Firepaw and Yellowfang. Firepaw recognized them: Tigerclaw the triple stryke, Darkstripe the crested sailback, Willowpelt the deadly nadder, and Bluestar their leader the woolly howl. Firepaw could smell the fear emanate from Yellowfang at the sight of them. Greypaw followed close behind. He landed close behind the group, hopping up beside Willowpelt.

Firepaw gave a hasty greeting ot his clan, but only Graypaw returned it. "Hi Firepaw!" He squawked.

"Silence!" Tigerclaw snarled.

Firepaw glanced at Yellowfang and groaned inwardly; he could still smell the fear-scent on her, but instead of cowering in submission, the spikey boulder dragon was glaring in defiance.

"Firepaw?" Bluestar's question was cool and measured. "What have we here? An enemy warrior - and recently fed, by the smell of you both. "Her eyes burned into him, and Firepaw dropped his head.

"She was weak and Hungry..." He began.

"And what about you? Was your hunger so bad that you had to feed yourself before you had gathered prey for your clan?" Bluestar went on. "I assume that you have a very good reason for breaking the warrior code? Firepaw was not fooled by the leader's soft tone.

Bluestar was furious - and rightly so.

Firepaw drew his tail in close and crouched lower to the ground.

Before he could speak there was a loud kiss from Tigerclaw. "Once a viking pet always a viking pet!"

Bluestar ignored Tigerclaw and looked instead at Yellowfang. Suddenly she looked surprised.

"Well, well Firepaw! It seems you have captured us a shadowclan dragon. And one I know well. You are Shaowclan's Nurture-wing, aren't you?" She chuffed to Yellowfang. "What are you doing so far into Thunderclan territory?"

I was the Shadowclan nurture wing. Now I choose to travel alone," Hissed Yellowfang, her spikes quivering.

Firepaw listened, astonished. Had he heard right? Yellowfang was a shadowclan Warrior? Her filthy condition must have masked her territorial scent. He might have enjoyed tackling her more if he'd known.

"Yellowfang!" Tigerclaw sneered, snapping his pincer claws menacingly. "It looks like you have fallen on hard times if you can be beaten by an apprentice!"

Now Darkstripe spoke. "This old dragon is no use to us. Let's kill her now. As for this vikingpet, he has broken the warrior code by feeding an enemy warrior. He should be punished."

"Keep your scales on," Bluestar purred calmly. "All the clans speak of Yellowfang's bravery and wisdom. It may help us to hear what she ahs to say. Come; we'll take her back to camp. Then we'll decide what to do with her - and with Firepaw. Can you fly?" She asked Yellowfang. "Or do you need help?"

"I ain't grounded yet." the grizzled female dragon snapped, limping forward as she spread her wings to take to the sky.

Firepaw saw that Yellowfang's eyes were glazed with pain, but she seemed determined not to show any weakness. She flapped her

powerful wings a few times and slowly rose from the ground. HE noticed a look of respect flicker across Bluestar's face before the Thunderclan leader took to the sky leading the way back to camp. The other warriors took up positions on either side of Yellowfang and the patrol moved off, carefully keeping pace with their ill prisoner.

Firepaw and Grewpaw fell in line a bit behind and bellow the group.

"Have you heard of Yellowfang?" Firepaw whispered to Graypaw.

"A bit. Apparently she was a warrior before she became a nurture wing, which is unusual. I can't imagine her as a loner, though. She has lived her whole life in Shadowclan."

"What's a loner?"

Graypaw glanced at him. "A loner is a dragon that isn't part of a clan or cared for by vikings. Tigerclaw says they are untrustworthy and selfish. They often live around viking dwellings, or in secluded places, but belong to no one and catch their own food."

"I might end up a loner once Bluestar has finished with me," Firepaw chirped.

"Bluestar is very fair," Graypaw reassured him. "She won't throw you out. She certainly seems pleased to have such an important Shadowclan dragon as a prisoner. I'm sure she's not going to make a fuss about you feeding the poor old sack of scales."

"But they keep moaning about prey being scarce! Oh! Why did I eat that yak?" Firepaw felt shame burn through his pelt.

"Well yeah." Graypaw nudged his friend. "That was sheep-brained. You really broke the warrior code there, but no dragon is perfect!"

Firepaw didn't answer but flew onward with a heavy heart. This was not the way he had hoped his first solo task would end.

As the patrol passed the sentries who guarded the camp entrance, the rest of Thunderclan came running to welcome their warriors

home.

Queens, Hatchlings, and elders crowded on either side. They peered curiously at Yellowfang as she was led into the camp. Some of the elders recognized the old boulder dragon. Word spread quickly through the clan that this was Shadowclan's nurture wing and a steady jeering hum rose up around them.

Yellowfang seemed deaf to the taunts. Firepaw couldn't help admiring the way she limped with dignity through the corridor of stares and insults. He knew she was in a great deal of pain, and hungry in spite of the young yak he had caught for her.

When the patrol reached the Highrock, Bluestar nodded toward the Dusty ground in front of it. Yellowfang followed the Thunderclan leader's silent command, sinking gratefully onto the earth. Still ignoring the hostile stares around her, she began pruning at her loose scales.

Firepaw noticed Spottedleaf emerge from her cave. She must have scented the presence of an injured dragon in the camp. He watched the crowd part to let the young dappled Deadly Nadder through.

Yellowfang glared at Spottedleaf and hissed, "I know how to take care of my own wounds. I don't need your help."

Spottedleaf said nothing but bowed respectfully and hopped back.

Some of the dragons had been out hunting, and fresh-kill was brought for the returning warriors to eat. They each took some food and carried it away to the warm silt clearing to eat it. Then the other clan members crowded forward to take their own share.

Firepaw paced hungrily around the clearing and watched as his clan mates crouched in their usual groups, chewing and gulping. He longed for a morsel, but didn't dare to take anything from the pile. HE had broken the warrior code. He guessed that this meant he was forbidden his share in the fresh-kill.

He paused beside the Highrock where Bluestar was sharing words with Tigerclaw. Uncertain, Firepaw looked to his leader for a signal

that he was allowed to eat. But the furry dragon and her senior warrior were busy murmuring at one another in low tones. Firepaw wondered if they were talking about him. Desperate to know his fate, he strained his caedytes to hear what they were saying.

Tigerclaw's yowl sounded impatient. "It's just too dangerous to bring an enemy warrior into the heart of Thunderclan! Now that she knows the camp, our island, even the youngest Shadowclan hatchling will hear of it. We will have to move."

"Calm down, Tigerclaw," Bluestar chuffed, "Why should we move? Yellowfang says that she is traveling alone now. There is no reason for Shadowclan to hear of it."

"Do you really believe that? What on earth was that foolish viking pet thinking of?" Tigerclaw spat, his tails clicking together angrily.

"But think for a moment, Tigerclaw," chided Bluestar, "Why would the Shadowclan nurture wing choose to leave her Clan? You seem to be afraid that Yellowfang will share our clan secrets with Shadowclan, but have you thought about how many Shadowclan secrets she might share with us?"

Firepaw could see by the way Tigerclaw's spines began to flatten that Bluestar's words made sense. He stood up straighter and nodded briefly. Without warning he took off, grabbing a fish from the pile with his foot and flew into a far corner of the camp.

Bluestar remained where she was. She looked out across the clearing, where some of the younger tiny tooths were fighting and tumbling playfully in the dust. Then she stood up and began to walk toward Firepaw. His heart lurched. What was she going to say to him?"

But Bluestar walked straight past him. She did not even glance at him; her eyes were clouded with unknown distant thoughts. "Frostscale!" she called out as she approached the nursery.

A white dragon with blue stripes emerged from the cave. She was long and short, with a thick tail like that of a gecko. Inside, the noise of crying and screeching grew louder.

"Hush hatchlings," purred the white dragon reassuringly. "I won't be long." Then she turned to her leader. "Yes, Bluestar? What is it?"

"One of our apprentices has seen trapper activity in the area. Warn the other queens to guard the nursery carefully. And make sure all hatchlings stay inside the camp until our warriors have driven them away.

Frostscale nodded. "I will pass on the warning, Bluestar. Thank you." Then she turned and slithered back into the nursery to quiet the crying hatchlings.

At last Bluestar strode over to the pile of fresh-kill and took her share. A plump cod had been left for her there. Firepaw looked on longingly as she carried it away to eat with the senior warriors.

Firepaw turned and wandered over to Graypaw. His friend had eaten his fill and lay with Ravenpaw outside the apprentices' den. He was perched on a log preening the spikes in his tail.

Graypaw saw Firepaw approach, and paused in his preening. "Has Bluestar mentioned your punishment yet?" he asked.

"Not yet," Firepaw replied gloomily.

Graypaw narrowed his eyes sympathetically and said nothing.

Bluestar's roar sounded across the clearing. "Let all those dragons old enough to fly to the tip of the mountain, join together for a meeting of our Clan."

Most of the warriors had finished eating and, like Graypaw, were busy grooming themselves. They lifted themselves gracefully with their wings and gathered below Highrock, where Bluestar waited to speak.

"Come on," chirped Graypaw. HE leaped up. Ravenpaw and Firepaw followed him as he fluttered over and nudged his way forward into a good position.

"I'm sure you have all heard about the prisoner we brought back with us today," Bluestar began. "But there is something else you

need to know." She glanced down at the raddled she-dragon who lay very still blending in with the large boulders below Highrock. "Can you hear me from there?" she asked.

"I may be old, but I'm not deaf yet!" Yellowfang spat in reply.

Bluestar ignored the prisoner's hostile tone and continued. "I'm afraid I have some very grave news. Today I traveled with a patrol into Windclan territory. The air was filled with the scent of Shadowclan. Almost every border island had been singed by Shadowclan warriors. And we met no Windclan dragons even though we journeyed deep into their portion of the archipelago."

Her words were met with silence. Firepaw saw confusion in the faces of the Clan dragons.

"Do you mean Shadowclan has chased them out?" Called Smallhorn hesitantly.

"We can't be sure," Bluestar meowed. "Certainly the scent of Shadowclan was everywhere. WE found blood, too, and fur. There must have been a battle, though we found no bodies from either clan."

A shocked yowl rose from the crowd in a single voice. Firepaw felt the dragons around him stiffen with shock and fury. Never before had one clan driven another from it's hunting grounds.

"How can Windclan have been driven out?" Oneeye croaked hoarsely. "Shadowclan is fierce, but Windclan is many. They have lived in the upper islands for generations. Why have they been chased out now?" She shook her head anxiously, her wings trembling.

"I don't know the answers to any of your questions," chuffed Bluestar. "It is well known that Shadowclan has recently appointed a new leader, following the death of RAggedstar. Their new leader, Brokenstar, gave no hint of any threat when we met him at the last Gathering."

"PErhaps Yellowfang has answers?" Snarled Darkstripe. "After all,

she is of Shadowclan!"

"I am no traitor! Nothing would make me share the secrets of Shadowclan with a brute like you!" growled Yellowfang, glaring aggressively at Darkstripe. The Thunderclan warrior moved forward, flames forming in his mouth, eyes closed to slits ready for a fight.

"Stop!" Howled Bluestar.

Darkstripe immediately swallowed his fire, even though Yellowfang goaded him on with blazing eyes and a ferocious hiss.

"That's enough!" Bluestar growled. "This situation is too serious for us to be fighting among ourselves. Thunderclan must prepare itself. From this moonrise onward, warriors will travel in larger groups. Other clan members will remain close to the camp. Patrols will travel the boundary edges more frequently, and all the hatchlings must stay in the nursery."

The clan below her nodded in agreement.

Bluestar continued. "Our need for warriors is our greatest obstacle. We shall get around this by speeding up the training of our apprentices. They need to be ready even sooner to fight for our clan."

Firepaw saw Dustpaw and Sandpaw exchange a thrilled glance. Graypaw was gazing up at Bluestar, his eyes wide with excitement. Ravenpaw just shuffled his paws anxiously. His pelt half fading into his surroundings.

Bluestar went on "One young cat has been sharing mentors with Graypaw and Ravenpaw. By teaching him, I shall speed up the training of all three apprentices." She paused and looked down at her clan. "I shall take on Firepaw as my own apprentice."

Firepaw opened his eyes wide in amazement. Bluestar was to be his mentor?

Beside him, Graypaw gasped, unable to hide his surprise. "What an honor! It's been seasons since Bluestar had an apprentice. Usually

she trains only the kits of demi-wings!"

Then a familiar voice rose from the front of the crowd. It was Tigerclaw. "So Firepaw is to be rewarded, not punished, for feeding an enemy warrior when he should have been feeding his own clan?"

"Firepaw is my apprentice now. I will deal with him," answered Bluestar. She stared into Tigerclaw's fierce eyes for a moment before lifting her head to address the whole clan once more. "Yellowfang will be allowed to stay here until she has recovered her strength. We are warriors, not savages. She is to be treated with respect and courtesy."

"But the clan can not support Yellowfang," Darkstripe protested. "We have too many mouths to feed already."

"Yeah!" Graypaw whispered into Firepaw's ear. "And some of them are bigger than others!"

"I don't need anyone to care for me!" spat Yellowfang. "And I'll split open anyone who tries!"

"Friendly, isn't she?" Graypaw murmured.

Firepaw flicked the tip of his tail in silent agreement. There were muffled chirps and cries from the other warriors as they grudgingly recognized the enemy warrior's fighting spirit.

Bluestar ignored the murmuring. "WE shall kill two prey with one blow, as it were. Firepaw, as punishment for breaking the warrior code, it will be your responsibility to care for Yellowfang. You will hunt for her and tend her wounds. You will fetch fresh bedding and clear away her dirt."

"Yes, Bluestar," mewed Firepaw, his head bowed in submission. Clear away her dirt! He thought to himself Ugh!

Mocking yowls came from Dustpaw and Sandpaw. "Good idea!" Hissed Dustpaw. "Firepaw had better be good at moving boulders!"

"And hunting!" added Sandpaw. "That sack of rocks is going to need feeding up!"

"Enough!" Bluestar interrupted them. "I hope Firepaw will find no shame in caring for Yellowfang. She is a healer, and she is his elder. For those reasons alone he should respect her!" She shot a sharp glance at Sandpaw and Dustpaw. "And there is no humiliation in caring for another dragon when it is unable to take care of itself. The meeting is over. I would like to speak to my senior warriors alone now." With that she flew off towards her den.

Lionheart followed her. The other clan dragons began to move away from the Highrock. One or Two congratulated Firepaw on being chosen as Bluestar's apprentice; others mockingly wished him luck looking after Yellowfang. Firepaw felt so dazed by Bluestar's announcement that he just nodded blankly.

Longtail stalked up to him. The broken horn that Firepaw had snapped off stood out. The young warrior drew back his lips into an ugly snarl. "Well, I hope you'll think twice about bringing strays back into the camp next time," he sneered. "Like I said, outsiders always bring trouble."

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"I'd go and see Yellowfang, if I were you," Graypaw whispered as Longtail flew away. "She doesn't look very happy."

Firepaw glazed over at the old Quaken. She was still lying beside the base of high-rock. Graypaw was right; she was glaring at him with a stare that could turn rocks to lava.

"Well, here goes nothing," He chirped, "wish me luck!"

"You" need the whole of Starclan on your side for this one," answered Graypaw. "Call out if you need a wing. If she looks like she's going to have you, I'll sneak up behind her and whack her on the head with a stiff fish."

Firepaw purred with amusement and trounced off towards Yellowfang. His cheerfulness quickly evaporated as he neared the injured queen.

The old dragon was clearly in a terrible mood. She hissed a warning, splitting her jaw and showing her broken and jagged teeth. "Stop right there, viking pet!"

Firepaw sighed. It seemed he was in for a fight. He was still hungry and beginning to feel tired. He longed to curl up in his nest for an afternoon nap. The last thing he wanted was to argue with this pitiful clump of scales and teeth. "You can call me what you like," He chuffed wearily. "I'm just following Bluestar's orders."

"You are a viking pet though, aren't you?" Yellowfang wheezed.

She's tired too, Firepaw thought. There was less fire in her voice, although her spite was strong as ever.

"I use to live with a Viking when I was a hatchling," Firepaw replied calmly.

"Your mother is a viking pet? Your Father a Viking pet?

"Y-yes," Firepaw stammered as he looked to the ground" He felt resentment burning in his belly. It was bad enough that his own Clan still viewed him as an outsider. Back at his old home, he was different there too, he had no family he knew. He was hatched with those vikings. He shouldn't have to answer to this foul-tempered prisoner.

Yellowfang seemed to take his silence as an invitation to go on. "Viking pet blood is not the same as warrior blood. Why don't you run home to your vikings now instead of looking after me? It's humiliating, being fussed over by a low born dragon like you!"

Firepaw's patience ran out. He snarled, "You'd still feel humiliated if I were warrior born. You'd feel ashamed whether I was a precious she-dragon from your own clan or a wretched viking that had picked you off the ground." He lashed his tail from side to side. "It's the fact that you need to rely on any dragon that you find so humiliating!"

Yellowfang stared at him, her orange eyes very wide.

Firepaw carried on fiercely: "You're just going to have to get used to being cared for until you are well enough to look after yourself, you spiteful old bone bag!"

He stopped as Yellowfang began to make a low, harsh wheezing sound.

Alarmed, Firepaw took a step towards her. The she-dragon was trembling all over, her eyes had married into tiny slits, her wings vibrated softly. Was she having some kind of a fit?

"Look, I didn't mean..." Firepaw began, before he suddenly realized that she was laughing!

Yellowfang chuffed, her wings flapping weakly in the air as a purr rumbled deep from inside her spiked chest.

Firepaw didn't know what to do.

"You have spirit, Viking pet," Yellowfang croaked, stopping at last. "Now, I'm tired and my leg hurts. I need sleep and something to put on this wound. Go and find that pretty little healing wing of yours and ask her for some herbs. I think you'll find Ceriman poultice would help. And, while you're at it, I wouldn't mind a few dragon berries to chew on. The pain is Killing me!"

Stunned by her change of mood, Firepaw turned quickly and sprinted toward Spottedleaf's den.

He had never been in this part of the camp before. With his caedytes pricked, he padded through the mossy tunnel under great rock that led into a small cave, light filtered in from a few cracks towards the roof. Some ferns grew along the edge where the light hit. A ledge towards the top of the cave gave the perfect nesting spot. From the ledge the Speckled gold and Ruby Deadly Nadder lifted her crowned head. She gave a friendly chirp and rose from her nest. Shaking out her loose scales, sending bits of gold, amber and ruby sparkling down.

Firepaw shyly dipped his head in greeting, and reeled off Yellowfang's list of herbs.

"I've got most of those in my supply cave," Replied Spottedleaf as she hopped down to Firepaw. "I'll fetch some goat weed too. If she dresses her wound with that, it'll keep off any infection. Wait here."

"Thanks," Firepaw hummed as the nurture wing disappeared into one of the three tunnels from her cave. He strained his eyes, trying to catch a glimpse of her inside. B ut the den was too dark to see anything; he could only hear the sound of rustling and smell the heady scents of unfamiliar herbs.

Spottedleaf emerged from the gloom and dropped a bundle folded in an old Viking sail by Firepaw's feet. "Tell Yellowfang to go easy on the dragon berries. I don't want her to deaden the pain entirely. A little pain can be useful, as it will help me judge how well she is healing."

Firepaw nodded and picked up the bundle with his front paws and lumbered oddly on his hind legs. "Thanks, Spottedleaf!" he chirped

excitedly then headed back through the moss tunnel into the main clearing.

Tigerclaw was sitting outside the warriors' den, watching him closely, his long braided tail rattling. As Firepaw made his way across the clearing to Yellowfang, carrying the herbs, he could feel the amber-eyes stare burning the scales on the back of his neck. HE turned his head and looked at Tigerclaw curiously. The warrior narrowed his eyes and looked away.

Firepaw dropped the bundle beside Yellowfang.

"Good," she chuffed. "Now, before you leave me in peace, find me something to eat. I'm starving!"

The sun had risen three times since Yellowfang had entered the camp. Firepaw woke early and Nudged Graypaw, who was still asleep beside him. His head tucked into his wing. "Wake up," Firepaw trilled. "Or you'll be late for training."

Graypaw lifted his head sleepily and growled in reluctant agreement.

Firepaw prodded Ravenpaw

The black changewing opened his eyes and immediately leaped to his feet, disappearing. "What is it?" He hissed, flapping his wings wildly.

"Calm down, Ravenpaw. It's time for training soon," Firepaw soothed.

Dustpaw and Sandpaw began to stir too. In their respective nests. Dustpaw's nest was made of moss and stones, whereas Sandpaw's was a hole filled of soft sand and silt. Firepaw spread his wings and flew out of the cave.

The morning was warm. Firepaw stared at the deep blue cloudless sky above. Today, however, the ground sparkled with a heavy wet dew that glistened on the grass and fern fronds. Greenleaf was drawing to a close, and soon it would start to feel colder.

He lay down and rolled in the earth beside the tree stump, stretching his four legs and tipping his head back to rub it on the cool ground. Then he flipped over onto his aide and looked across the clearing to see if Yellowfang was awake yet.

She had been given a resting place just outside the elders nesting grounds. Her nest was carved into the edge of the mountain and dirt, just out of hearing of the elders, but in full view of the warriors' den across the clearing. Firepaw could just see a mound of grey rock like pelt, rising and falling in time to a gentle rumble of sleep.

Graypaw trotted out of the den behind him, Followed by Sandpaw and Dustpaw. Ravenpaw appeared last, with a nervous glance around the clearing before he emerged fully into the open.

"Another day looking after that mangy old sack of rocks, eh Firepaw?" chirped Dustpaw. "I bet you wish you were out training with us."

Firepaw sat up and shook the dust from his scales. He wasn't going to let himself get annoyed by Dustpaw's taunts.

"Don't worry, Firepaw," Murmured Graypaw. "Bluestar will have you back in training before long."

"Perhaps she thinks a Viking pet is better off staying in camp, tending to the sick," Scoffed Sandpaw rudely, tossing her sleek sandy head and throwing him a scornful look.

Firepaw decided to ignore her barbed comments. "What is Whitestorm teaching you today, Sandpaw? He asked.

"We're doing battle training today. He's going to teach me how a real warrior fights," Sandpaw replied proudly.

"Lionheart's taking me to the Great Sycamore island," Graypaw said, "to practice my scale throwing. I'd best go. He'll be waiting."

"I'll come with you to the edge of the island," Firepaw said eagerly, "I have to catch breakfast for Yellowfang. Coming Ravenpaw? Tigerclaw must have something planned for you/"

Ravenpaw sighed and nodded, then followed Graypaw and Firepaw as they flew out of the camp.

Even though his injury was completely healed, he still seemed to have little enthusiasm for warrior training.

"Here," chirped Firepaw. He dropped a large sheep onto the ground beside Yellowfang.

"About time," she growled. The she-dragon had still been sleeping when Firepaw had entered the camp after his hunting trip. But the smell of fresh kill must have woken her, for now she had pulled herself into a sitting position.

She dropped her head and hungrily gulped down Firepaw's offerings. She had developed a massive appetite as her strength returned. Her wound was healing well, but her temper remained as fierce and unpredictable as ever.

She finished her meal and complained, "The base of my tail itches like fury, but I can't reach it. Give it a wash, will you?"

With an inward shudder, Firepaw crouched down and set to work.

As he pulled away molting scales, he noticed a gang of small hatchlings tumbling in the dusty earth nearby. They were mauling each other and play fighting. Sometimes quite viciously. Yellowfang, who had closed her eyes as Firepaw groomed her, half opened one eye to observe the hatchlings as they played. To his surprise, Firepaw felt her spine stiffen beneath his teeth.

He listened for a moment to the tiny yelps and squeaks of the hatchlings.

"Feel my fire, Brokenstar!" growled one brown striped rumblehorn hatchling. He barreled into a little black and white Monstrous nightmare hatchling, who was pretending to be the Shadowclan leader. The two kits bundled toward the Highrock. Suddenly the monstrous nightmare hatchling gave a mighty heave and found the rumblehorn from his back. With a startle squeak, the little hatchling cannoned into Yellowfang's side.

Instantly the old dragon left to her feet. Flapping her wings, spitting violently. "Stay away from me, you scrap of scales!"

The rumblehorn hatchling took one look at the furious dragon, turned tail, and ran. He hid himself behind a blue and white Flame-whipper queen, who was staring furiously across the clearing at Yellowfang.

The black and white monstrous nightmare froze where he stood. Then slowly, step by step, he cautiously backed away toward the safety of the nursery.

Yellowfang's reaction had shocked Firepaw. He thought he'd seen her at her most vicious when they fought after their first meeting, but her eyes burned with a new rage now. "I think the hatchlings are finding it hard being confined to camp," He squawked cautiously. "They're getting restless."

"I don't care how restless they are," growled Yellowfang. "Just keep them away from me!"

"Don't you like hatchlings?" Firepaw asked, curious in spite of himself. "Did you never have your own?"

"Don't you know Nurture wings can't have offspring." Hissed Yellowfang furiously.

"But I heard you were a warrior before that," Firepaw ventured.

"I have no offspring!" Yellowfang spat. She snatched her tail away from him and sat up. "Anyway" Her voice suddenly lowered, and she sounded almost wistful - "Accidents seem to happen to hatchlings when I'm around them."

Her orange eyes clouded with emotion. She laid her chin flat on her forepaws and stared ahead.

Firepaw watched her wings sink as she released a long, silent sigh.

Firepaw looked at her curiously. What could she mean? Was the old she-dragon being serious? IT was hard to tell; Yellowfang seemed to swing from mood to mood so quickly. He shrugged to himself and

went on with the grooming.

"There are a couple of metal spots I couldn't pull out," He told her when he had finished.

"I should hope you didn't try, you idiot!" Snapped Yellowfang. "I don't want any scales snapped, thank you very much. Ask Spottedleaf for a little bit of sandstone scraps. The molten glass it makes helps loosen metal deposits in boulder dragon pelts like mine."

"I'll get some now!" Firepaw offered. He was glad of a chance to get away from the grumpy dragon for a while. And it was certainly no hardship to go and see Spottedleaf again.

He walked toward the mossy tunnel. Dragons crossed the clearing around him. Carrying rocks and trees in their teeth. White he had been grooming Yellowfang, the camp had grown active. It had been like this every day since Bluestar announced Windclan's disappearance. The queens were fortifying the nursery and camouflaging the entrance of the nursery, Making sure there was only one way in and one way out. Other dragons were working at the edges of the camp, filling in any small cavern entrances making the only ways in through the cave system or over the mountain ridge.

Even the elders were busy, tunneling. Warriors filed steadily past, piling pieces of fresh-kill beside them. Ready to be stored inside the new cavern. There was an air of quiet concentration, a determination to make the clan as secure and well supplied as possible.

If Shadowclan made a move on their territory, Thunderclan would shelter inside the camp. They would not let themselves be driven from their hunting grounds as easily as Windclaw had been.

Darkstripe, Longtail, Willowpelt and Dustpaw were waiting silently at the camp entrance. Their eyes were fixed on the opening to the camp tunnel. A patrol was just returning, muddy and wing-sore. As soon as the warriors entered the camp, Darkstrip and his companions approached and exchanged words with them. Then

they slipped quickly out of the camp. Thunderclan's borders were not being left unguarded for a moment.

Firepaw headed down the mossy tunnel that led to Spottedleaf's den. As he entered the clearing, he could see Spottedleaf was preparing some sweet smelling herbs.

"Can I have some sandstone bits for Yellowfang's metal spots?" Firepaw chirped.

"In a moment," replied Spottedleaf, nudging two piles of herbs together and delicately mixing the fragrant heap with the claw tip of her wing.

"Busy?" Firepaw asked, settling down on a warm patch of embers.

"I want to be prepared for any casualties," Spottedleaf murmured, glancing up at him with her clear amber eyes. "Firepaw met her gaze for a moment, then looked away, an uncomfortable feeling prickling his pelt. Spottedleaf turned her attention back to the herbs.

Firepaw waited, happy to sit quietly and watch her at work.

"Right," she squawked at last. "What was it you wanted? Sandstone shards?"

"Yes, please." Firepaw stood up and stretched each back leg in turn. The patch of embers had warmed his belly and made him feel sleepy.

Spottedleaf flew to a ledge and brought something down. She held it gingerly in her mouth. It was a net with some small rocks in it. She passed it to Firepaw. He tasted her warm, sweet breath as he took the net between his teeth.

"The stones are prone to crumbling so be careful." Spottedleaf explained. "Don't eat any, or your flame will be thick for days."

Firepaw nodded and trotted back to Yellowfang, feeling suddenly cheerful and tingling with energy.

"What does sandstone taste like?" Firepaw asked curiously. His old friend Smudge often ate metals from the Viking camp.

"It depends on the sandstone." Yellowfang grumbled as she lapped up the sandstone shards. "It depends where they come from, the ones found in the center of islands taste different than ones near the coast." she yawned, revealing her blackened and broken teeth. The warmth of the day was making her sleepy. "Clear away my molted scales, then you can go and do whatever it is you apprentices do," she murmured.

Firepaw nodded and used the net Spottedleaf gave him to gather up her molted and singed scales. He made his way towards the camp's tunnel entrance. He was keen to return to his friends.

"Firepaw!" a shrill voice called from the side of the clearing.

Firepaw turned. It was Halftail, the purple terrible terror.

"Where are you off to?" Croaked the old dragon curiously. "You ought to be helping with the preparations."

"I've just been taking care of Yellowfang, I was taking care of her moltings."

Amusement flickered through Halftail's spines, "Well, don't come back without some fish or other fresh-kill. We need as much as we can find."

"Yes, Halftail," Firepaw replied.

He made his way out of the camp and down the mountain trail, following one of the island's rivers to a nice gravel pit where he dumped all of the molting. Near the gravel pit, the river led into a small lake.

Firepaw flew out over the water, watching his reflection as he glided over the smooth water. Slowly he reached out a paw and dragged it across the water, causing ripples to spread to both shores.

The sound of wing flaps drew his attention away, he looked up and

saw Graypaw and Ravenpaw landing on the edge of the lake.

Firepaw glided to them and landed next to them, "Where are Lionheart and Tigerclaw?"

"They've gone to join the next patrol," answered Graypaw as he dipped his crowned head to take a drink, "They ordered us to spend the rest of the afternoon hunting."

"Halftail told me the same thing," Firepaw chirped, flinching as Greypaw lifted his head shaking off the cold water dripping from his face. "Everyone's busy back at camp. You'd think we were about to be attacked at any moment."

"Who says we won't be?" Hissed Ravenpaw, his eyes flicking from side to side as if he expected an enemy patrol to dive from the clouds at any moment.

Firepaw looked at the heap of fresh-kill that was piled beside the two apprentices. "Looks like you've done all right today."

"Yeah," Graypaw chuffed proudly. "And we've still got the rest of the afternoon to hunt. Do you want to join us?"

"You bet!" Firepaw trilled. He gave a flap of his wings then took to the sky after his friends.

Fire[aw could tell that the dragons back at camp were impressed with the amount of prey the three apprentices had managed to catch during their afternoon hunt. They were welcomed back with celebratory flames and friendly nuzzles. It took them four journeys to carry all of their catch to the storage cave the elders had carved.

Lionheart and Tigerclaw had just returned with their patrol as Firepaw, Graypaw and Ravenpaw carried their last load into the camp.

Well done, you three," Lionheart praised. "I hear you've been busy. The store is almost full. You might as well add that last lot to the file of fresh-kill for tonight. And take some of it back to your den with you. You deserve a feast!"

The three apprentices flapped their wings with delight.

"I hope you've not been neglecting Yellowfang with all this hunting, Firepaw," Tigerclaw growled warningly.

Firepaw shook his head impatiently, eager to get away. He was starving. He had obeyed the warrior code this time and not eaten a morsel while he was hunting for the Clan. Not even a minnow. Nor had Graypaw or Ravenpaw.

They trotted away and dropped the last of their catch on the fresh-kill that already lay at the center of the clearing. Then each of them took a piece and carried it back to the clearing outside their empty den.

"Where are Dustpaw and Sandpaw?" asked Ravenpaw.

"They must still be out on patrol," Firepaw guessed.

"Good," huffed Graypaw. "Peace and quiet."

They ate their fill and lay back to wash. The cool evening air was welcoming after the heat of the day.

"Hey! Guess what!" squawked Graypaw suddenly. "Ravenpaw managed to squeeze a compliment out of old Tigerclaw this morning!"

"Really?" Firepaw gasped. "What on earth did you do to please Tigerclaw -- hypnotize him?"

"Well," Ravenpaw began shyly, looking at the base of his leaf like antennae, " I killed a giant screaming eel."

"How'd you manage that?" Firepaw asked, impressed.

"It was an old one," Ravenpaw admitted modestly.

"But it was huge!" added Graypaw. "Even Tigerclaw couldn't find fault with that! He's been in such a bad mood since Bluestar took you on as her apprentice." He preened his chest scales thoughtfully for a moment. "Hang on, make that since Lionheart was made

deputy."

"He's just worried about Shadowclan and the extra patrols," Ravenpaw said, hastily. "You should try not to annoy him."

Their conversation was interrupted by a loud ground shaking howl from the other side of the clearing.

"Oh, no" Firepaw groaned, getting to his paws. "I forgot to take Yellowfang her share!"

"You wait here," chirped Graypaw, leaping up. I'll take her something."

"No, I'd better go,' Firepaw protested. "This is my punishment, not yours."

"No one will notice," argued Graypaw. "They're all busy eating. You know me; quiet as a terrible terror, quick as a speed stinger. Wait here."

Firepaw flopped down again, unable to hide his relief. He watched his friend fly away from their clearing and to the fresh kill pile.

As if he were carrying out orders, Graypaw confidently swooped down, grabbing a clawful of fish. Without stopping made his way towards Yellowfang.

"Stop, Graypaw! A loud growl rumbled from the entrance of the warriors cave. Tigerclaw strode out and flew over to Graypaw. "Where are you taking those fish? He demanded.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Firepaw watched, helpless. Beside him, Ravenpaw froze midchew and crouched over his meal with his eyes wider than ever. The tips of his tail and wings began to disappear.

"Ummm..." Graypaw slowly looked around the clearing hovering uncomfortably.

"Not helping young Firepaw by feeding that greedy traitor over there, are you??"

Firepaw watched Graypaw study his hanging paws for a moment. Finally he replied, "I, er, I was just feeling hungry. I was going to take them off and eat them by myself. IF I let that pair get a look in" He glanced at Firepaw and Ravenpaw, "They'll leave me with nothing but bones and fins."

"Oh, *really?"* sneered Tigerclaw, *"*Well, if you're so hungry, you might as well eat them here and now!"

"But-" Graypaw began, looking up at the senior warrior in alarm.

"Now!" Snapped Tigerclaw.

Graypaw dropped the fish to the ground, then began to eat them. He swallowed the first few. The last few took longer for him to finish. Firepaw thought he'd never manage to swallow it all. And his own stomach clenched in sympathy, but eventually Graypaw gave a final, difficult gulp and the last of the fish disappeared.

"Better now?" Asked Tigerclaw, his voice smooth with mock sympathy.

"Much," Replied Graypaw, stifling a burp.

"Good." Tigerclaw stalked off again, back to his den.

Graypaw slink uncomfortably back to Firepaw and Ravenpaw.

"Thanks, Graypaw," Firepaw trilled gratefully. Nudging his friend's wing. "That was quick thinking.

The noise of Yellowfang's roar rose into the air once more. Firepaw sighed and got to his paws. He would make sure he took her enough to see her through the night. He wanted to turn in early. His stomach was full and his wings were tired.

"Are you okay, Graypaw? He asked as he turned to leave.

"Uuhhh," groaned Graypaw. He was hunched into a low crouch, squinting with pain. "I've eaten too much!"

"Go and see Spottedleaf," Firepaw suggested. ""I'm sure she'll find

something to help. You can return the net when you do."

"I hope so," said Graypaw, as he flew off slowly.

Firepaw wanted to watch him go, until another ground shaking howl from Yellowfang sent him sprinting across the clearing.

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a/n Be on the lookout I'm going to be finishing some art of Spottedleaf shortly and posting to this chapter, and also in the allegiances part as well.

Poll: Super edition

Sorry to get anyone's hopes up expecting a new chapter drop.

I am still working on the next chapter. However, I am curious if any of you would be interested in a super edition in this AU setting?

If so where should I start?

Bluestar's Prophecy
Yellowfang's Secret
Tallstar's Revenge
Crookedstar's Promise

Also if my drawing skills were better I would make a comic for this, but they are not there yet. I appreciate any support(like/comment) to know people are interested.

Keep on reading and being awesome!

Into the Wild Ch. 10

[image]

By the following morning, a thin drizzle soaked the island ground, forming puddles at the entrances to the dens.

Firepaw woke up feeling chilled. It had been an uncomfortable night, many puddles had formed in the apprentice den as water dripped from the ceiling of the small cavern. He dropped down from his perch and shook out himself vigorously, scatting loose scales across the floor. Then he left the apprentices' den and trotted across the clearing to Yellowfang's nest.

Yellowfang was just stirring, her rough scales blending into the rocks around her. She lifted her head and squinted at Firepaw as he approached. "My bones ache this morning. Has it been raining all night?"

"Since just after moonlight," Firepaw replied. He reached out and prodded her rocky nest cautiously, the coals of her bedding had turned into a black mud. "Your bedding is soaking wet. Why don't you move to the cavern nearer to the nursery? It's more sheltered there."

"What? And be kept awake all night by those shrieking hatchlings?! I'd rather get wet!" Yellowfang growled.

Firepaw watched her circle stiffly in her bed, compacting the mud. "Then at least let me fetch you something to dry your bedding," he offered, keen to drop the subject of kits if it upset the old she-dragon so much.

"Thank you, Firepaw" replied Yellowfang quietly, settling down again.

Firepaw felt stunned. He wondered if Yellowfang was feeling alright. It was the first time she had thanked him for anything, and the first time she had not called him *Viking pet.*

"Well, don't just stand there like a startled sheep; go and fetch some moss!" she snapped.

Firepaw's caedytes twitch with amusement. This was more like the Yellowfang he was used to. He nodded and sprinted off.

He almost crashed into Speckletail in the middle of the clearing. This was the queen who had watched Yellowfang's angry outburst at the striped rumblehorn hatchling the day before.

"Sorry, Speckletail," Firepaw apologized. "Are you on your way to see Yellowfang?"

"What would I want with *that* unnatural creature?" replied Speckletail crossly. "Actually it's you I was looking for. Bluestar wants to see you."

Firepaw hurried towards the Highrock and Bluestar's den.

Bluestar was sitting outside, her head bobbing rhythmically as she licked the grey fur below her throat. She paused when she noticed Firepaw. "How is Yellowfang today?" she chuffed.

"Her bedding is wet, so I was going to fetch her something to help dry it." Firepaw replied.

"I'll ask one of the queens to see to that." Bluestar gave her chest another lick, and then eyed Firepaw carefully. "Is she fit enough to hunt for herself yet?" she asked.

"I don't think so." Firepaw said, "She can fly short distances, but not enough to leave the island."

"I see," Bluestar hummed. She looked thoughtful for a moment. "It is time for you to return to your training, Firepaw. But you'll need to work hard to make up for time you have lost."

"Great! I mean, thank you, Bluestar!" Firepaw stammered.

"You will go out with Tigerclaw, Graypaw and Ravenpaw this morning," Bluestar continued. "I've asked Tigerclaw to assess the warrior skills of all our apprentices. Don't worry about Yellowfang;

I'll make sure someone sees to her while you are gone."

Firepaw nodded.

"Now, join your companions," Bluestar ordered. "I expect they're waiting for you."

"Thank you, Bluestar," Firepaw squawked. He turned with a flick of his tail and darted toward his den.

Bluestar was right; Graypaw and RAvenpaw were both waiting for him by their favorite tree stump. Graypaw looked stiff and uncomfortable, his long spikes sparkled with water droplets. Ravenpaw was pacing around the tree stump, lost in thought, his long tendrils twitching.

"So, you're joining us today?" Graypaw called as Firepaw landed. "Some day, huh? He shook himself roughly to get rid of the clinging wetness.

"Yes, Bluestar told me that Tigerclaw is going to assess us today. Are Sandpaw and Dustpaw coming too?"

"Whitestorm and Darkstripe took them out on patrol. I suppose Tigerclaw is going to look at them later," Graypaw answered.

"Come on! We should get going," urged Ravenpaw. He had stopped pacing and now hovered beside them anxiously.

"Fine by me," chirped Graypaw. "Hopefully some exercise will warm me up a bit!"

The three short-wings flew through the tunnel and out of the camp. They hurried to the sand bar. Tigerclaw had not arrived. So they hung around in the shelter of a few sea stacks.

"Are you worried about the assessment?" Firepaw asked Ravenpaw, as the young dragon slithered around the seastack with a quick, nervous jerking motion. Pausing and blending into the gray green stone before moving again. "There's no need to be, You're Tigerclaw's apprentice, after all. When he reports back to Bluestar, he's going to want to tell her how good you are."

"You can never tell with Tigerclaw." hissed Ravenpaw, still moving about.

"For goodness' sake, sit still," Graypaw grumbled. "At this rate you'll be worn out before we begin!"

By the time Tigerclaw arrived, the sky had changed. The clouds looked less like thick smoke, and more like soft white balls of cotton like the coats of sheep. Blue skies couldn't be far behind, but the breeze that brought the softer clouds carried a fresh chill.

Tigerclaw greeted them briskly and launched straight into the exercise details. "Lionheart and I have spent the last few weeks trying to teach you how to hunt decently," he clicked. "Today you'll have a chance to show me how much you have learned. Each of you will take a different route and hunt as much prey as possible. And whatever you catch will be added to the supplies in the camp."

The three apprentices looked at one another, nervous and excited. Firepaw felt his heart begin to beat faster at the prospect of a challenge.

"Ravenpaw, you will follow the sundown trail stopping at Sycamore island as far as the snake rock island. That should be easy enough for your pitiful skills. You, Graypaw," Tigerclaw continued, "will take the route along the sea gorge, as far as the trade route.

"Great," grumbled Graypaw, "Wet scales for me!" Tigerclaw's stare silenced him.

"And finally you, Firepaw. What a shame your great mentor couldn't be here today to witness your performance for herself. You shall take the route through the Pine island, through the fog past the ship wreck, and to the islets beyonds."

Firepaw nodded, frantically tracing the route in his head.

"And remember," Tigerclaw finished, fixing them all with his pale-eyed stare, "I shall be watching all of you."

Ravenpaw was the first to take to the skies. Tigerclaw flew off in a different direction, leaving Graypaw and Firepaw alone in the

hollow, trying to guess who Tigerclaw would follow first.

"I don't know why he thinks Snakerocks is an easy route!" chirped Graypaw. "The place is crawling with slitherwings and eels. Prey are often over hunted there!"

"Ravenpaw'll have to spend his whole time trying not to get bitten," Firepaw agreed.

"Oh, he'll be okay," chirped Graypaw. "Not even a speed stinger would be fast enough to catch Ravenpaw at the moment, he's so jumpy. I'd better get going. See you back here later on. Good luck!"

Graypaw dove down, flying close to the water heading towards where the gorge turned the water dark. Firepaw paused to listen before taking to the skies heading for Pine island.

IT felt strange to be going in this direction, toward the viking settlement he had been raised in. Cautiously Firepaw crossed the trade routes into the foggy seas, and dove down into the forest of Pine Island, alert for the sound and scent of prey.

A movement caught his eye. It was a rabbit, scrabbling through the brush. Remembering his first lesson, Firepaw landed silently, dropping into the stalking position, keeping his weight in his haunches, his paws light on the ground. His tail raised as to not brush against the ground. Slowly he opened his mouth preparing a blast. The technique worked perfectly. The rabbit didn't detect Firepaw as he killed it with one blast. Then he buried it, so that he could pick it up on his return journey.

Firepaw traveled the entirety of Pine Island, catching a few more prey. He traveled to the other nearby islets until he found himself soaring above the ship wrecks. The fog danced across the broken decks, in and out of the green metal cages. Firepaw took a deep breath, his mouth open. The strange taste that rose from the old metal cages was indescribable. Viking hadn't been to these ships in a while.

Firepaw followed the many broken masts and jagged rocks that occasionally poked out of the waves. The water lapped almost

silently up on some of the ship decks. He was tempted to stop and drink, but he hesitated. Landing on the ships could set off a trap.

He decided to wait. Perhaps there would be a sea stack that was close enough to the sea. He hurried onward through the fog and crossed the trade route on the far boundary.

He was back amid some sea stacks amid the thick fog. He flew onward until he found a small islet. He landed on the rocky shore, and lapped up a few mouthfuls of the cold sea water. Firepaw's pelt began to prickle with some extra awareness. He recognized the sounds and scents familiar from his old watching place on the abandoned lookout post, and knew instantly where he was. These were the sea stacks that bordered the cove of the viking settlement. He must be very close to his old home now.

In the distance Firepaw could smell Vikings and hear their echoed voices. It was a group of young vikings fishing in a small boat. Firepaw silently leapt to the air, gliding silently in the fog. He peered through the fog. The sounds were distant enough to be safe. He changed direction, skirting the noises, making sure he was not seen.

Firepaw stayed alert and watchful, but not just for Vikings--Tigerclaw might be somewhere nearby. He thought he heard a wing flap above him. He sniffed the air, but smelled nothing new. Was he being watched now? He wondered.

Below him, Firepaw sensed movement. At first he thought it was Tigerclaw's dark scales, but then he saw a flash of white. He landed on a sea stack and inhaled deeply. The smell was unfamiliar; it was a dragon, but not a Thunderclan dragon. Firepaw felt his spines bristle with the instincts of a clan warrior. He would have to chase the intruder out of Thunderclan territory!

Firepaw watched the creature moving between the sea stacks in short bursts, darting from one to the next. He could see its outline clearly as it flew close to the sea. Firepaw waited for it to fly past the one he was perched on. He pulled himself closer to the rock, his tail waving back and forth in slow rhythm. As the black and white dragon neared, Firepaw rocked from side to side, spreading his

wings prepared to spring. One more heartbeat; then he dove. The black and white dragon startled, a loud explosion filled the air with smoke, terrified the dragon raced away through the sea stacks.

Firepaw gave chase. It's a Viking pet! He thought as he raced through the fog, smelling it's fear-scent. *In my Territory!* He was closing in rapidly on the fleeing animal. Firepaw opened his jaw preparing a blast, when suddenly a projectile was flying straight at him. Firepaw rolled out of the way. The dragon had landed and was scrambling across the rocky shore towards a cave. With blood roaring in his Caedytes, Firepaw blasted at the cave entrance. He landed on the dragon pinning it down. Firepaw could feel the dragon struggling beneath him as he gripped on with all his claws. It let out a desperate and terrified roar.

Firepaw released his grip and backed away. The black and white dragon cringed at the collapsed cave entrance, trembling, and looked up at him. Firepaw lifted his nose, feeling a ripple of disgust at the intruder's easy surrender. This rough, plump Hot Burple with it's round eyes and clean scales, looked very different from the lean, scarred dragons Firepaw lived with now. And yet something about this dragon seemed familiar.

Firepaw stared harder. He sniffed, drawing in the other dragon's scent. *I don't recognize the smell*, he thought, searching his memory.

Then it came to him. "Smudge!" He gasped.

"H-ho-how d-d-do you know my n-name?" Stammered Smudge, still couching.

It's me!" Firepaw chuffed.

The viking dragon looked confused.

"We were hatchlings together. I lived in the village with you!" Firepaw insisted.

"Rusty?" gurgled Smudge in disbelief. "Is that you? Did you find the wild dragons again? Or were you captured by dragon hunters! How did you escape!?"

"I'm called Firepaw now," Firepaw meowed. He relaxed his shoulders and retracted his teeth.

Smudge relaxed too. His eyes lit up, "Firepaw?" he echoed, amused. "Well, Firepaw, it's about feeding time. You look like you were starved. You certainly weren't this scrawny last time we met!"

"I don't need the vikings to feed me," Firepaw replied. "I feed my clan and myself."

"Your clan?" Smudge looked bewildered for a second; then his expression changed to one of complete astonishment. "You mean you're really living with the wild dragons?"

"Yes!" Firepaw paused. "Hows- you know...?"

Smudge nodded, "They are okay, they leave out a fish every once in a while near the old look out post, in hopes that you'll return. Although they've done it less and less." After a long silent pause, "Come on then! What's it like, living wild?" Smudge demanded. "Is it as good as you thought it'd be?"

Firepaw thought for a moment: about last night, sleeping in a damp cave. He thought about Yellowfang's moltings, and trying to please both Lionheart and Tigerclaw at once during training. He remembered the teasing he suffered about his Viking hatched blood. Then he remembered the thrill of his first catch, of flying freely, of warm evenings beneath the stars sharing flames with his friends.

"I know who I am now," He stated simply.

Smudge tipped his head to one side and stared at Firepaw, clearly confused. "I should be getting home," He groaned, "They'll need me at the forge."

"Go carefully, Smudge." Firepaw leaned forward and gave his old friend an affectionate nudge to the shoulder. Smudge nuzzled him in return. "And stay alert. There may be dragon hunters in the area, or worse another dragon who is not fond of Viking hatched dragons as I am."

Smudge's tail twitched nervously at these words. He looked around

cautiously and scrambled off into the woods. "Good-bye Rusty," He roared. "I'll tell everyone at the village that you are okay!"

"Bye, Smudge." Firepaw nodded. In the distance he could hear a horn followed by the shout of a viking. Firepaw took to the sky and started back toward his own home, sniffing the air as he went. I'll get some fish here, he decided. Then I'll catch something else on the way back through the pines. He felt bursting with energy after meeting Smudge and realizing just how lucky he was to live in the clan.

He looked down at the waves below him and glided silently, every sense alert. Now he just needed to impress Bluestar and Tigerclaw, and the day would be perfect.

Into the Wild - CH 11

A/N: Edit, added in the rest of the chapter.~~~

Firepaw returned with a pile of fish gripped firmly between his teeth. He dropped the pile in front of Tigerclaw, who stood waiting in the clearing of the sandbar, the tide was out and the sun had dried the sand they stood on.

"You're the first one back," Clicked the warrior dragon.

"Yeah, but I've got loads more prey to fetch." Firepaw trilled quickly. "I buried it back-"

"I know exactly what you did," Tigerclaw growled," I've been watching you."

The whistling of wind announced Graypaw's return. He was carrying a small yak in his mouth, which he dropped beside Firepaw's pile of fish. "Yuck!" He spat, "Yaks have too much fur. I'll be picking hair out of my teeth all evening."

Tigerclaw paid no attention to Graypaw's grumbling. "Ravenpaw's late," he observed. "We'll give him a bit longer and then return to camp."

"But what if he's been bitten by a slitherwing?" Firepaw protested.

"Then it's his own fault." Tigerclaw replied coldly. "There's no room for fools in Thunderclan."

They waited in silence. Graypaw and Firepaw exchanged glances, worried about Ravenpaw. Tugerclaw stood motionless, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

Firepaw was the first to since Ravenpaw's arrival, his caedytes twitched. He leapt to his paws as the black and white dragon swooped down from the clouds, looking unusually pleased with himself. Dangling from his front claws was the long, black and

yellow patterned body of a giant eel.

"Ravenpaw! Are you okay?" Firepaw called.

"Hey! Chirped Graypaw, rushing forward to admire Ravenpaw's kill. "Did that bite you?"

"I was too quick for it!" Ravenpaw purred loudly. Then he caught Tigerclaw's eye and fell silent.

Tigerclaw fixed all three excited apprentices with a cold stare. "Comeone," He said shortly, "Let's collect the rest of your prey and get back to camp."

Firepaw, Graypaw and Ravenpaw entered the camp, flying behind Tigerclaw. Their impressive day's catch hung from their mouths and claws. Although RAvenpaw struggled to keep height with his large dead eel. As they emerged from the gorse into the camp, a group of young hatchlings scrambled out of the nursery to watch them pass.

"Look!" Firepaw heard one of them squawk. "Apprentices, just back from hunting!" He recognized the little striped rumblehorn Yellowfang had hissed at the day before. Sitting next to him was a small grey thornridge, no more than two moons old. A tiny black thornridge and an amber dappled sandwraith hatchling stood beside them.

"Isn't that the viking pet, Firepaw?" Squeaked the grey thornridge.

"Yeah! Look at his sharp eyes and sleek wings!" chirped the black one.

"They say he's a good hunter," the dappled sandwraith added. "He is shiny like Lionheart. Do you suppose he's as good as him?"

"I can't wait to start my training," Replied the rumblehorn. "I'm going to be the best warrior Thunderclan has ever seen!" Firepaw lifted his chin, feeling proud at the kits' admiring comments. He followed his two friends into the center of the clearing.

"A giant sea eel!" Graypaw chirped again, as the apprentices dropped their catch for the other dragons to share.

"What shall I do with it?" asked Ravenpaw, sniffing the eel's long body as it lay beside the heap.

"Can you eat adders?" Asked Graypaw as he shook his head from the smell.

"Trust you to think of your stomach!" Firepaw joked, butting Graypaw with his head.

"Well, I wouldn't want to eat it." murmured Ravenpaw. "I mean, my claws smell pretty foul after carrying it back."

"Let's put it on the tree, then." suggested Graypaw, "So that Dustpaw and Sandpaw can see it when they get back." They each carried a piece of their fresh-kill and the eel back to their den. Graypaw carefully placed the adder on the stump, arranging the eel so that it could be seen clearly from all sides. Then they ate. When they had finished they sat close together to share flames with one another.

"I wonder who Bluestar will choose to go to the Gathering?" Firepaw asked, "It'll be a full moon tomorrow."

"Sandpaw and Dustpaw have been twice already." Replied Graypaw.

"Perhaps Bluestar will choose one of us this time." Chirped Firepaw, "Afterall, we've been training for almost three seasons now."

"But Sandpaw and Dustpaw are still the eldest apprentices." Ravenpaw pointed out. Firepaw nodded. "And this Gathering will be an important one. It'll be the first time the clans have met since Windclan disappeared. No dragon knows what Shadowclan is going to say about it."

Tigerclaw's low growl interrupted them. "You are right, short-wing." The warrior had strolled up to them unnoticed. "By the way, Firepaw," he added smoothly, "Bluestar wants to see you."

Firepaw looked up, startled. Why would Bluestar want to see him?

"Now- if you can spare the time," Tigerclaw hissed.

Firepaw lept up immediately and flew off across the clearing

towards Bluestar's den.

Bluestar was sitting outside, her tail flicking restlessly back and forth. When she saw Firepaw she stood and looked steadily down at him. "Tigerclaw has told me that he saw you talking with a dragon from the viking village today." She chuffed quietly.

"But-" Firepaw began.

"He said that you began fighting with this dragon but ended up sharing flames with it."

"That's true," Firepaw admitted, feeling his scales prickle defensively. "But he was an old friend. We grew up together." He paused and swallowed. "When I was a viking pet.

Bluestar looked at him for a long moment. "Do you miss your old life Firepaw?" She asked. "Think carefully now."

"No." *How can bluestar think that?* Firepaw wondered. His head was spinning. What was Bluestar trying to make him say?

"Do you wish to leave the clan?"

"Of course not!" Firepaw was shocked by her question.

Bluestar didn't seem to hear the passion in his answer. She shook her head, looking suddenly old and tired. "I won't judge you if you leave us. Firepaw. Perhaps I expected too much of you. Perhaps my judgment has been clouded by the clan's need for new warriors."

Panic swept through Firepaw at the thought of leaving the clan forever. "But my place is here! This is my home," He roared in protest.

"I need more than that, Firepaw. I need to be able to trust in your loyalty to Thunderclan, especially now that it looks like Shadowclan is planning an attack. We don't have room for anyone who isn't sure whether their heart lies in the past or the present."

Firepaw took a deep breath and chose his next words carefully, "When I saw smudge today- that's the viking dragon Tigerclaw saw

me talking with - I saw what life would have been if I had stayed with the vikings. I felt happy I had not stayed. I was proud I left." He held Bluestar's gaze without flinching. "Meeting Smudge made me certain I made the right decision. I could never have been satisfied with the soft life of a viking pet. You have my loyalty, perhaps doubt is clouding your eyes to see that."

Bluestar looked closely at him for a moment, her eyes narrow. Then she nodded. "Very well," she said. "I believe you."

Firepaw dipped his head respectfully and let out a silent sigh of relief.

"I spoke to Yellowfang earlier," Chuffed Bluestar in a lighter tone, "She thinks a lot of you. She's a wise old dragon, you know. And I suspect she wasn't always bad-tempered. Indeed, I think that I could grow to like her."

Firepaw felt an unexpected glow of pleasure at these words. Maybe, in caring for Yellowfang, his admiration for her had grown into affection, despite the dragon's ill temper. Whatever the reason, he was glad Bluestar liked her too.

"But there is something about her that I don't trust." Bluestar went on quietly. "She will stay with Thunderclan for now, but remain as a prisoner. The queens will care for her. You must concentrate on your training."

Firepaw nodded and waited to be dismissed, but Bluestar hadn't finished. "Firepaw, although you showed bad judgment today in talking to a viking dragon, Tigerclaw *was* impressed by your hunting skills. In fact, he reported that you all did well. I am pleased with your progress. You will come to the Gathering - all three of you."

Firepaw could hardly stand still. His body tingled with excitement. The gathering! "What about Sandpaw and Dustpaw? He chirped.

"They will remain behind and guard the camp." replied Bluestar, "Now you may go." She flicked her long furry tail to show he was dismissed, and returned to her grooming.

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Graypaw and Ravenpaw looked stunned to see Firepaw bounding happily toward them. They had been waiting nervously for him beside their favorite tree. Firepaw sat down and looked at his friends.

"Well?" Graypaw demanded. "What did she say?"

"Tigerclaw told us you'd been sharing flames with a viking pet this morning," burst out Ravenpaw his pelt flickering. "Are you in trouble."

"No. Although Bluestar wasn't pleased," Firepaw admitted ruefully. "She thought I might want to leave Thunderclan."

"You don't, do you?" Greypaw asked, cocking his head to the side.

Firepaw gave his friend an affectionate swipe. "Yeah, you'd hate that. You need me to catch deer for you!" All you can catch these days are ill yak!"

Graypaw dodged out of the way of Firepaw's blow and tossed his tail to retaliate.

"You'll never guess what else she said!" Firepaw went on. He was too excited to waste time play-fighting.

Graypaw immediately smoothed his spikes, "What?" he asked.

"We're going to the gathering!" Firepaw exclaimed wiggling excitedly in his spot.

Greypaw let out a roar of delight and leapt to the sky. His wing knocked a branch shaking the eel from the tree. It hit Ravenpaw on the head and wrapped itself around his neck.

Ravenpaw hissed with alarm and surprise, turning invisible. He then turned on Graypaw, "Watch it!" he roared crossly. He shook the eel onto the ground and slowly reappeared.

"Scared it might try to bite you?" Firepaw teased. He crouched
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down, growling, and sidled up to Ravenpaw.

Ravenpaw's tendrils twitched "Some eel you'd make." he retorted, before leaping onto Firepaw, knocking him easily to his back.

Graypaw reached down with an open foot and gave Ravenpaw's tail a tug. As Ravenpaw turned to snap at Graypaw with a gentle bite, Firepaw jumped to his feet, and shot a quick small plasma blast. Sending Graypaw tumbling to the ground. All three dragons tumbled across the clearing closest to the apprentice's cave. Finally they fell apart and settled themselves, panting beneath the tall tree.

"Are Dustpaw and Sandpaw coming too?" puffed Graypaw.

"Nope!" Firepaw replied, unable to disguise the note of triumph in his voice. "They have to stay behind and guard the camp."

"Oh, let me tell them!" begged Graypaw. "I can't wait to see the look on their faces!"

"Me neither!" Firepaw agreed. "I can't believe we are going instead of them! Especially after Tigerclaw saw me with Smudge today."

"That was bad luck." Answered Graypaw. "We all caught a load of prey in the assessment. That must be what decided it."

"I wonder what the Gathering will be like," Ravenpaw mused.

"It'll be fantastic," Graypaw replied confidently. "I bet all the great warriors will be there. Clawface, Stonescales..."

But Firepaw wasn't listening anymore. Instead, he found himself thinking about Tigerclaw and Smudge. Graypaw was right- it was bad luck that the great warrior had been observing him when he had met his old friend. Why couldn't he have been watching Graypaw or Ravenpaw instead? In fact it was bad luck that Tigerclaw had sent him so near the Viking island at all. Suddenly a dark thought entered Firepaw's mind: Why had Tigerclaw sent him so near to his old haunts? Had he wanted to test him? Could it be the great dark warrior didn't trust his loyalty to Thunderclan?

UPDATE SOON??

I am so sorry for the long wait!!! I got logged out of my account and couldn't get back in for so long.

My other social media account(tumblr) was completely lost, all of my accounts deleted so I lost a lot of my work and progress..

Not to mention im in the works of moving!

I will try to get in a chapter or two update the weekend of the 1st, so at the latest Tuesday the 5th!

I recently finished my book of dragons cover still working on the art and filling it all out.

Plus I've been making baby dragons look at how cute!! I do sell them at fairs and on mercari working on putting them on my own site (I also make a matching dice set to the dragons as well!!)

Some of these are unfinished but I keep forgetting to take picture of my finished sets!

Lastly!! I gave myself a new tattoo. I did it myself and I'm super excited! it's on my calf.

Let me know how you all are doing in the comments

I apologize, for the delay. Life got hectic, I spent a few months in Japan and now that I'm back in the states I've been working on several big projects with hopes of publishing.

I don't know when I will update, but I am still working on it.